

Use of Contractors for Military Purposes Under Scrutiny

By William Neikirk - Chicago Tribune

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WASHINGTON -- Long before the world learned of abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was preaching the virtues of using contractors to do a significant amount of the military's work.

His prime example of where outsourcing should be expanded: prisons.

The secretary said at a town hall meeting in August that the Army pays \$20,000 to \$40,000 to hold a prisoner each year, while it costs Kansas only \$14,000 per year.

"I don't think of running a prison as a core competency of the United States military," he said.

Now, the scandal at Abu Ghraib, where contractors were used as interrogators and interpreters, has prompted members of Congress and private military analysts to question the Pentagon's growing reliance on contractors to handle many of the military's support jobs, especially in a hot spot such as Iraq.

Also adding to the scrutiny on the role of security contractors were the deaths and mutilations of four contract workers for Blackwater Security Consulting of Moyock, N.C. The men, ambushed in Fallujah on March 31, were providing security for a U.S. military food convoy.

Critics say private contractors should not be placed in "mission-critical" assignments, such as combat or interrogation, and should not have any influence in the chain of command. They say the Pentagon should more vigorously check backgrounds of contractors and adopt procedures to establish greater accountability and oversight over contract abuses.

And they wonder whether the movement toward privatization of many military functions should be revisited.

"Is it more cost effective to bring in folks and pay them really big bucks for these security concerns, or is it more effective to use troop strength?" said Scott Silliman, a law professor and

military expert at Duke University. "Are they getting the best return on the dollar? I am not sure."

Rumsfeld and other top military officials assured the Senate Armed Services Committee on Friday that in the Abu Ghraib case, 27 contractors employed as interrogators and interpreters served under military officers, who were in charge.

"These people have no supervisory capabilities at all," said acting Army Secretary Les Brownlee.

The workers have been identified as employees of CACI International of Arlington, Va., and Titan Corp. of San Diego, two prominent military contractors.

In a telephone call to investors last week, CACI Chief Executive J. P. "Jack" London deplored the abuses at Abu Ghraib but said the company had no information on possible involvement by its workers.

A Pentagon spokesman said the use of contractors in the Abu Ghraib case is being investigated, but he said there is no general re-examination of outsourcing procedures.

Praise for contractors

"The vast majority of our contractors are doing incredible work for the U.S. government," he said.

In a letter last week to Rep. Ike Skelton (D-Mo.), the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, Rumsfeld said the Defense Department is drafting "uniform guidance" covering security companies working under contract in Iraq. He did not elaborate.

Rumsfeld's outsourcing policy has blossomed in Iraq, which has turned into a contractor's heaven. About 20,000 people are working for private security contractors, said Brookings Institution analyst Peter Singer, and tens of thousands more are working on reconstruction of the country.

But increasingly, companies doing reconstruction say they must hire contractors--many of them former military personnel--to handle security. An inspector general's report for the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq said security costs are eating up at least 10 percent to 15 percent of the budget for reconstruction.

Contractors are collecting billions of dollars in Iraq for military functions that include feeding the troops, providing housing, fixing computers and setting up communications systems.

Halliburton subsidiary KBR has 24,000 personnel in Iraq and Kuwait, handling contracts to repair oil wells and provide logistics, including feeding troops, handling mail, building bases and providing Internet connections.

Cheney's ex-company accused

Halliburton, once headed by Vice President Dick Cheney, has been accused of overcharging for fuel trucked from Kuwait. A Justice Department investigation is under way on the overcharging, but the company said it saved taxpayers \$100 million.

The Brookings Institution's Singer, author of a book titled "Corporate Warriors," finds fault with the trend toward contracting out many military functions. If a contractor makes mistakes in logistics or if some of its personnel find situations too risky, he said, military operations can be jeopardized.

"Even when it comes to the issue of maintenance, these individuals don't have to be there when the going gets tough," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), a longtime critic of private military contractors.

The military security business has grown to a giant industry in a little over a decade, Singer said, now topping \$100 billion in revenue worldwide and with many of the major players based in the United States.

Alan Schvotkin, senior vice president and chief counsel for Professional Services Council, a trade group representing military contractors, said most security companies in Iraq are "doing what they have been asked to do."