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Families of civilians killed in Fallujah complain to Congress



AFP/Getty Images/File Photo: Family members of the Blackwater employees who were ambushed and killed 31 March, 2004 in...

Wed Feb 7, 7:48 PM ET

WASHINGTON (AFP) - The female relatives of four security guards killed in 2004 in Fallujah, [Iraq](#), complained to lawmakers about what they claim is private contractor Blackwater's indifference to their plight.

My son put all "his experience and his knowledge from the army ... to use with Blackwater. But they shot off his arms and his legs. They just left him out there to die. They did not provide anything for him," said the mother of Jerry Zovko, one of four former US soldiers killed and mutilated in Fallujah.

"Although everyone remembers those images of the bodies being burnt, beaten, dragged through the streets and ultimately hung up from a bridge, we continue to re-live that horror day after day," the four women said in a joint statement to the House of Representatives Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

"Following that horrific incident on March 31, 2004, we turned to Blackwater for answers. What we received was appalling," said Donna Zovko, Kathryn Helvenston, Rhonda Teague and Kristal Batalona.

"We were told that the information surrounding the circumstances in which our loved ones were killed was 'confidential.' When we insisted on seeing the report concerning the incident, Blackwater told us that we would have to sue them to get it," they added.

The women accused Blackwater of deliberately neglecting the safety requirements of the four employees in their difficult assignments, in order to save money.

Committee chairman Henry Waxman ([news](#), [bio](#), [voting record](#)) said the case of the four murdered Blackwater employees was symbolic of the murky world of sub-contracted work in Iraq.

"Almost four billion dollars in taxpayer funds has been paid for private security forces in the reconstruction effort alone, but sorting out overheads, subcontracts, sub-subcontracts, profit and performance has been nearly impossible," Waxman said.

"It is now almost three years later, and we still don't know for sure the identity of the prime contractor under which the four Blackwater employees were working," he added.

What is certain, added the Democratic lawmaker speaking on behalf of the victims' families,

"taxpayer dollars never reached the security personnel on the ground.

"They believe that the money for protective equipment took a backseat to the multiple layers of contract profits."

The families have taken their complaints against Blackwater to court.

Blackwater's general counsel, Andrew Howell, told the hearing of the difficulty of ensuring the safety of their employees in Iraq.

"Our professionals are highly skilled and experienced. Yet, for all of the experience and training, no one can guarantee that they will be safe when they step into a war zone. Our enemy has ensured that," Howell said.

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