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Deadly jobs of Iraq contractors examined in Congress

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Family members of four Blackwater USA contractors killed in Iraq are sworn in on Capitol Hill Wednesday.

- House committee investigates private security firms in Iraq
- Memo: "Guys are in the field with borrowed stuff"
- Mom: "They sent him out there to die"
- Blackwater private security firm denies shorting employees

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WASHINGTON (CNN) -- A manager for a private security contractor warned executives that he lacked proper equipment in Iraq a day before four of its employees were killed and two were left hanging from a bridge, a House committee disclosed Wednesday.

The manager's e-mail was read during a congressional hearing into the use of private contractors in Iraq. In it, he complained to Blackwater USA bosses that he didn't have hardened vehicles, radio gear or ammunition.

The hearing also featured emotional testimony from relatives of the slain men. ([Watch victims' mothers describe their search for answers](#))

"They did not provide anything for him," said Donna Zovko, whose son, Jerry, was one of the four Blackwater USA contractors killed in the 2004 ambush in Falluja, west of Baghdad.

"He had his discipline, he has his know-how, knowing the Middle East as he did," Zovko said. "But they didn't give him the tools to work with. They just simply sent him out there to die."

Zovko and three other men -- Scott Helvenston, Mike Teague and Wesley Batalona -- were ambushed, dragged from their vehicles and killed on March 31, 2004. The burned and mutilated remains of two of the men were hung from a bridge over the Euphrates River.

The image fueled American outrage and led to an unsuccessful push to retake the city from Sunni Arab insurgents the next month. ([Look back at the incident](#))

Their families have sued North Carolina-based Blackwater Security Consulting, one of the best-known of hundreds of private military contractors operating in Iraq, alleging the company failed to provide their relatives with adequate gear and weaponry.

Blackwater has denied the allegations and argued that the men agreed to assume the risks of working in a war zone. Its general counsel, Andrew Howell, told the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee on Wednesday that Blackwater cut no corners in providing for its workers.

Hearing examines Iraq contractors

The relatives and officials from representatives of the companies involved in the incident appeared before the committee during a hearing into the sometimes-convoluted ties among contractors hired to assist the U.S. occupation and reconstruction efforts in Iraq.

In the case of the men killed in Falluja, Blackwater was working for a Kuwait-based company, Regency Hotel and Hospitality. Regency, in turn, had been hired by ESS Support Services, which was supplying and operating dining halls for the U.S. military as a subcontractor for other companies hired by the U.S. Army, said Rep. Henry Waxman, the committee's chairman.

"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," said Waxman, D-California.

Tina Ballard, the Army's deputy assistant secretary for policy and procurement, testified later in the day and said the service has corrected a previous accounting of the contracts.

Ballard told the committee in the hearing that ESS -- itself a subcontractor for Halliburton subsidiary Kellogg, Brown and Root Services -- had subcontracted security work to Blackwater.

"The U.S. Army is continuing to investigate this matter, and we are committed to providing full disclosure of the results of our investigations to the committee," she said.

Workers lacked critical equipment

The day before the fatal run through Falluja, Blackwater's Baghdad manager, Tom Powell, warned his bosses by e-mail that the reports they were getting from Regency lacked "reality-based information" and that his men were short of critical equipment.

"I need comms. I have only borrowed hand-helds. ... I need ammo, 9mm and 5.56. I need Glocks and M-4s. ... Guys are in the field with borrowed stuff and in harm's way," Powell wrote.

The reply, from Blackwater executive Mike Rush, said Regency was responsible for supplying vehicles and radios, and body armor "is not our responsibility either."

Howell acknowledged that the company's Baghdad mission was under-equipped at the time, but denied Rush's e-mail showed company officials were "passing the buck."

"It does not mean that Blackwater was not actively seeking to assist in identifying and obtaining the required equipment," he said. And he said that while the Blackwater office in Baghdad may have had shortages overall, individual teams did not go out without necessary equipment.

Both Blackwater and Steve Murray, the director of contracting for ESS, pointed fingers at Regency during the hearing. Murray said ESS gave Regency "ultimate authority for go or no-go scenarios," and Howell said Blackwater received only a small initial fee from the \$2.3 million it billed Regency for its work.

Wednesday's hearing was the second this week into the management of U.S. operations in Iraq. Republicans questioned whether the session was aimed at aiding the families in their lawsuit, citing a letter from their lawyer to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-California, requesting hearings.

The committee's ranking Republican, Virginia Rep. Tom Davis, said the structure of the contracts and subcontracts made it unlikely that any of the companies could gouge the government. But he said questions remained as to whether contractor Kellogg, Brown and Root acted improperly by letting subcontractors "use any type of security services" without knowing whether those costs were included in fixed-price deals.

"Make no mistake, there are still too many problems with contracting in Iraq," Davis said. "Just look again at the mess made through the Baghdad police college, with raw sewage surging through classrooms."

Rep. Darrell Issa, R-California, said federal law prevents lawsuits against contractors acting as government agents in a war zone, and he raised hackles among the witnesses when he asked whether their attorneys wrote their opening statement.

"Why are you dwelling on that?" asked Kathryn Helvenston-Wettengel, Helvenston's mother.

"We're subcontracting out our war. I understand there's 100,000 contractors over there, and there doesn't seem to be a law that applies," she added.

Rep. Christopher Shays, R-Connecticut, defended Issa, who said lawyers sometimes craft witness testimony to get points made on the public record. But Shays said the families had a right to sue when Blackwater refused to answer questions about their relatives' deaths. He also said Congress should take a closer look at the role private contractors have played in Iraq.

"The reason we paid contractors what we paid them was so they could pay people who would make much more there than here and a lot of people who went to Iraq went because they could make more money and they knew they were being put in harm's way," Shays said. "They could make two, three, four times as much."

"Not if they're dead, they can't," Helvenston-Wettengel said. "They can't make a thing."