

Private security contractors in Baghdad kill two Iraqi women

By Kate Randall
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Two Iraqi women were killed Tuesday afternoon when their vehicle was fired on by a private security convoy in central Baghdad. The guards were from the Unity Resources Group, an Australian-owned company.

Iraqi Gen. Abdul Karim Khalaf told CNN that the mercenaries fired 19 bullets, killing two passengers in the front of a white sedan. Numerous witnesses recounted a violent scene in which the driver panicked, shots rang out and the convoy sped away.

The shootings came amid mounting anger over the operations of private security contractors in Iraq. A September 16 massacre in Baghdad by Blackwater Security USA killed 17 Iraqi civilians and wounded at least 22 others. An Iraqi government probe determined that the killings by the Blackwater mercenaries were unprovoked and that they had “committed a deliberate crime and should be punished by law.”

A spokesman for the US Embassy in Baghdad, which exclusively contracts Blackwater for its security details, claimed there was “no embassy connection” to the latest incident.

Interior Ministry officials said Tuesday’s shootings occurred around 2:30 p.m. near the former German embassy building in the Karrada district, a business and residential area generally regarded as secure. The security convoy consisted of four white SUVs, and the women were in an Oldsmobile.

Shopkeeper Basim Mohammed told Reuters that four or five cars were driving down the street, when “an Oldsmobile came out of this side road and it had two women in the front and children in the back.”

“They fired a warning shot when they were about 80 meters away, which probably made them panic because they went forward a little bit, and [the security guards] started firing at her from all directions,” he told Reuters

television.

Footage from the scene showed blood stains down the side of the car. After the vehicle had been towed away, shattered glass and pools of blood remained on the pavement.

Another shopkeeper, Ammar Fallah, told Agence France Presse that guards in the convoy signaled for the woman driving the car to pull over. “When she failed to do so they opened fire, killing her and the woman next to her,” he said. “There were two children in the back seat but they were not harmed. The women were both shot in the head.”

Another witness, Sattar Jabar, told AFP that the women’s car apparently moved too close to the convoy. “It tried to avoid the convoy of four white SUVs of the foreigners but it came close to the last vehicle, which then opened fire immediately,” killing the two women.

Jabar said that a third woman seated in the back was hit in the shoulder and that one of the children had been struck by flying glass.

Another witness told CNN, “Maybe she [the driver] got confused or she got scared and when she got scared, they frantically started shooting at them.” He added that he opposed the foreign contractors operating in Iraq. “I care for my brother and friend and these...foreigners don’t care or serve us in any way,” he said.

Another witness to the shooting said the women were shot from a distance, telling CNN, “It was a family, two women, one was driving and the second one was a passenger. They killed them and they were at a far distance from them.”

A policeman who heard gunfire and came running to the scene told Aljazeera.net that after the shooting, the security contractors “rode away like gangsters.”

In connection with the September 16 shootings, the Iraqi government wants Blackwater to pay \$136 million in compensation, \$8 million to each of the families of the 17 victims. According to a senior Iraqi government source, Blackwater has been informed of the demand.

According to the Associated Press, the Iraqi officials are also demanding that the US government cut its ties with Blackwater within six months.

An official Iraqi probe into the massacre, commissioned by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, said the Blackwater guards at no time came under direct or indirect fire before shooting up the intersection in Nisour Square more than three weeks ago. This account has been corroborated by numerous eyewitnesses and a US military examination of the events.

The Iraqi government is also demanding that Blackwater turn over the guards involved for prosecution in Iraqi courts. Interior Ministry spokesman Abdul Karim Khalaf stated on Monday, “Employees of the company violated the rules governing use of force by security companies. They have committed a deliberate crime and should be punished under the law.”

The US has consistently rejected such demands, as the US military and foreign contractors are presently immune from prosecution in Iraqi courts under a decree issued by the US provisional government in the early days of the occupation.

An Iraqi government source told Reuters that the \$8 million demanded per victim in the September 16 atrocity roughly corresponded to compensation paid by the Libyan government to the families of the 270 people killed in the 1988 Lockerbie airline bombing over Scotland.

Commenting on the Iraqi government’s demand, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack told reporters, “Obviously, the issue of what some refer to as bereavement payments—or a number of different names for them—is an issue of some sensitivity that we are taking a look at.”

“It is an issue that commonly turns up when you have security incidents in which there is a loss of life,” he said. “As with other previous incidents throughout Iraq, civilian or military, we are taking a look at the issue.”

McCormack cautioned against “jumping to conclusions” about Blackwater’s conduct in the fatal

shootings, pointing to ongoing investigations into the incident being conducted by the State Department and the Pentagon. He also made the claim that Al Qaeda was far more often responsible for civilian deaths than security contractors working for the US.

Blackwater and other security contractors form an integral part of the US occupation and have earned the hatred of the Iraqi population for their violent actions. These firms operate by US military rules, under which US troops and foreign contractors are authorized to fire at vehicles that get too close to convoys or checkpoints, after giving a series of warnings known as “escalation of force.”

A lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union is seeking copies of military reports on such shootings. Of 500 claims for compensation filed by Iraqi families in connection with the ACLU, 133 were allegedly killed for driving too close to a convoy, while 59 were gunned down at checkpoints.

According to the *Boston Globe*, “Those cases include allegations that US soldiers, on several occasions, shot at random from convoys, killing bystanders; a case in which soldiers allegedly fired 200 rounds into a car that did not stop soon enough at a checkpoint; killing two parents and injuring their two young children; and an allegation that US soldiers had fired on a car carrying a pregnant woman who was on her way to the hospital to give birth, killing her.”

Blackwater USA has acknowledged involvement in 195 shootings since 2005. Eighty percent of these were “escalation of force incidents” in which they fired without provocation. The US military has refused to release statistics of shootings of civilians at checkpoints or near convoys.

According to figures obtained by the McClatchy news service, in the last year 429 Iraqi civilians have been killed or wounded in checkpoint and convoy shootings by US soldiers and military contractors.

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