



Should humanitarians use private military services?

Private military services have taken part in conflicts from Bosnia to Iraq, supporting the work of governments, corporations and NGOs. Is this a healthy development? **Peter W. Singer** from the Brookings Institution in the US warns the humanitarian community to be business-savvy before they take the privatisation plunge

THE EMERGENCE OF A GLOBAL TRADE in hired military services, better known as the “privatised military industry,” is one of the most interesting developments in warfare over the last decade. The businesses in this industry, known as “privatised military firms” (PMFs), range from small consulting firms, comprised of retired generals, to transnational corporations that lease out wings of fighter jets or battalions of commandos.

These firms presently operate in over 50 countries. They have been the key actors in a number of conflicts, helping to win wars in Angola, Croatia, Ethiopia-Eritrea, and Sierra Leone. Even the US military has become one of the prime clients of the industry. From 1994-2002, the US Defense Department entered into over 3,000 contracts with US-based firms, estimated at a contract value of more than \$300bn.

Global industry

The privatised military is not just a US phenomenon, but a global industry. For example, the Canadian military recently privatised its supply chain to the British firm, Tibbett and Britten. But the work of the industry is not limited to working for governments. Clients have ranged from rebel groups and drug cartels to humani-

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tarian NGOs and the UN. For instance, the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and World Vision have used PMFs to protect their facilities and staff in hostile environments such as Sierra Leone and the Congo, while environmental groups like the World Wildlife Fund have dealt with the firms in seeking to protect endangered species from well-armed poachers.

Perhaps no example better illustrates the industry’s growing activity than the recent war in Iraq. Private military employees handled everything from feeding and housing coalition troops to maintaining the US’s most sophisticated weapons systems, like the B-2 stealth bomber. Over 15,000 private military contractors play even wider roles in the current occupation period, guarding key facilities and staff from terrorist and guerilla strikes and training the post-Saddam army, paramilitary, and police.

The PMF industry is driven by both military and business fundamentals and breaks down into three broad sectors:

- Military provider firms, also known as “private military companies” or PMCs, which provide combat and protection services;
- Military consultant firms which provide advisory and training services;
- Military support firms, which provide back-up services, such as logistics, technical support, and transportation.

The expansion of this industry offers many possibilities, such as cost savings through competition. More importantly, it has arisen in a time in which there is a gap between the supply and demand for professional military forces in the changed global security environment.

Humanitarian workers now operate in far more dangerous war zones at greater risks. Claims of neutrality no longer offer protection from warlords, child soldiers, and terrorists and casualties among NGOs have escalated.

A business solution?

Thus, many have begun to call for a 21st century business solution to the world's 21st century human security problems. Proponents of exploring this idea increasingly count some surprising voices, driven primarily by frustration at the humanitarian experiences of the last decade. These include some activists within the humanitarian community and many traditional supporters of UN peacekeeping (such as even former UN Under Secretary Sir Brian Urquart, considered the founding father of peacekeeping), disheartened at the sorry state of operations in places like Bosnia and the DRC.

There is plenty of scope for closer relations between the humanitarian world and the privatised military business. International institutions and/or NGOs could hire PMFs to protect their facilities and staff on a more institutionalized basis, as opposed to the present ad-hoc setup carried out at the field level (under the radar screen, at least seven UN bodies and multiple NGOs have contracted with PMFs). Many argue that the firms' role could even be extended further, to guard vulnerable local civilians and refugees, whom these organisations serve.

Finally, aid organisations could make better use of consulting and support firms, who could offer their expertise in less controversial areas such as disarmament and engineering and aid distribution.

Perils of privatisation

However, the humanitarian community would do well to consider the perils of privatization, as well as its promised advantages of efficiency and expediency.

Privatisation of any type always has positive and negative effects. This is particularly true in the military sphere, where profit motives further cloud the fog of war. Private military businesses may be able to deploy more quickly and cheaply, but their hire has also raised a number of concerns.

Firstly, the goals of clients are often at odds with firms' aims of maximizing profits. Also, while firms may have market incentives not to abandon their posts or jump ship for better paying contracts elsewhere, their employees often do not. Operations will thus depend on soldiers, unaccountable to the code of military justice, who make their own personal risk vs. reward analysis. Thus, if it decides that it wants to hire the firms, the humanitarian community must establish clear and competitive contract award processes to identify the best firm for the job at the best price, oversight and management provisions to ensure that the contract goes as planned, and contingency plans for replacing the firm if it or its individual employees fails in its duty.

Scrupulous recruitment

Secondly, privatisation also raises problems of employee selection and accountability. Military firms recruit effective, but not necessarily congenial workers. Many former members of the most notorious and ruthless units of the Soviet and Apartheid regimes have found employment in the industry. Even if the firms

are scrupulous in screening their recruits, it is still difficult for them to monitor their troops in the field. Furthermore, if employees do commit violations, there is little incentive for a firm to turn them in to any authorities, which are often absent in failed states. To do so risks scaring off other prospective employees and clients.

One dark example is what happened with the Dyncorp firm, hired by the US and the UN to provide international police in Haiti and the Balkans. Several of its employees became involved in the sex and arms trade, including its Bosnia site supervisor who videotaped himself raping two young women. None of the employees were ever criminally prosecuted and the whistleblowers were fired. The firm now has a similar contract in Iraq.

Thus, in the present unregulated market, the burden falls on the client to ensure the proper vetting and screening of the firms, before it hires it. One approach to resolve this dilemma might be for the UN and/or umbrella aid organisations to establish a database of vetted and financially transparent firms that have met international standards. This database would have to be constantly updated, with the attachment of military observers and auditors to monitor contracts, recruiting, and operations.

The third challenge of privatisation is its long-term implications. The key to any durable peace is the restoration of legitimacy. Unfortunately, if security is privatised, the companies become a temporary mechanism to preserve peace, yet do little to address underlying causes of unrest and violence. Moreover, the reliance on an outside private force does little to re-

establish the local social contract. Instead, it reinforces the idea that power belongs only to those who can afford it. Humanitarian groups must be aware of this tendency and avoid it wherever possible.

Jeopardise neutrality

The presence of firms might jeopardise norms of neutrality among aid groups and lead to a further multiplication of armed forces on the ground. Finally, if the work of PMFs were limited only to the protection of aid workers and facilities, external threats might be diverted to less well protected local poor and refugees. Humanitarian compounds could therefore become another symptom of the "secession of the successful" that now characterises the split between rich and poor.

With this in mind, the humanitarian community must be judicious in its contracts with PMFs. The long and short-term benefits should be weighed up before the contracts are signed and these considerations should be constantly updated as local public capacities develop. Humanitarian agencies should also do their utmost to ensure that contracting is done in accordance with and supported by the appropriate political authorities.

In the end, meeting humanitarian needs with private military solutions is not necessarily a terrible or impossible thing. But, it clearly carries both advantages and disadvantages that must constantly be weighed and mitigated through effective policy and smart business sense. In this most essential public realm, where people's lives are at stake, we must be doubly sure of our dealings with private industry. We should not let our frustrations lead us down the dangerous path of privatisation without due consideration.