

U.S. Companies Profit From War In Northern Iraq

INCIRLIK, Turkey (IPS)—Everyday the United States Air Force F-15 Strike Eagles and F-16 Fighting Falcons roar aloft over the Kurdish quarter of the city of Adans, about an hour's drive inland from the Mediterranean coast of central Turkey, to patrol the skies over Northern Iraq.

The jet pilots are catered and housed at the Incirlik military base nine miles outside the city by a company named Vinnell, Brown & Root (VBR), a joint venture of two U.S. multinationals—Vinnell of Fairfax, Virginia, and Kellogg, Brown & Root of Houston, Texas.

Brown & Root is a subsidiary of Halliburton, the company that U.S. vice-president Dick Cheney headed before taking up his present position with President George W. Bush's administration. It is also the world's largest oil field services company, building pipelines and drilling rigs for multinationals like Chevron in countries from Angola to the Gulf of Mexico.

Vinnell is also a construction company but its most important contract is training the 75,000 strong Saudi Arabian National Guard, a military unit descended from the Bedouin warriors who helped the Saud clan impose control on the peninsula early last century.

The joint venture's latest contract, which started July 1, 1999 and will expire in September 2003, was initially valued at \$118 million and includes a guaranteed profit.

In the next few months VBR employees expect workloads to increase

substantially if the war against Iraq goes ahead. Over 30,000 U.S. soldiers may be based at Incirlik and other local military airports at Batman, Corlu, Diyarbakir, Konya, Malatya and Mus.

VBR's role at Incirlik began on Oct. 1, 1988 when the company won its first contract to run support services at the base as well as at two more minor military sites in Turkey: Ankara and Izmir.

VBR site manager Alex Daniels, who has worked at Incirlik for almost 15 years, explains what the company does for the military: "We provide support services for the United States Air Force in areas of civil engineering, motor vehicles transportation, in the services arena here—that includes food service operations, lodging, and maintenance of a golf course. We also do U.S. customs inspection."

During the Gulf war in January 1991, the base was a major staging post for thousands of sorties flown against Iraq and occupied Kuwait dropping over 3,000 tons of bombs on military and civilian targets. "We were working overtime during the Gulf war. I was working at the fire department as a fire inspector. A lot of airplanes landed and we had to support them 24 hours a day," says Orhan Sener, president of Harbis, the war workers union.

Right now the U.S. Air Force and VBR employ some 1,450 local workers at the base to support approximately 1,400 U.S. soldiers currently living at Incirlik, who staff Operation northern Watch monitoring the no-fly zone above the 36th parallel in Iraq.

Saving money is the primary reason for outsourcing services, says Major Toni Kemper, head of Public affairs at the base.

"The reason that the military goes to contracting is largely because it's more cost-effective in certain areas. I mean, there was a lot of studies years ago as to what services can be provided via contractor versus military personnel. Because when we go contract, we don't have to pay health care and all the other things for the employees, that's up to the employer," he said.

But activist watchdogs say that the company has a record for overspending and wasting taxpayers' money. Frida Berrigan at the World Policy Institute in Washington, says Brown and Root were chosen for this contract despite the fact that the General Accounting Office had filed a report in 2000 that said that Brown and Root had over-billed the U.S. government in huge proportion while they were providing services for U.S. military personnel in Kosovo.

"They had four times as many personnel as they needed for particular jobs; they had people working around the clock getting overtime for no apparent reason. They imported plywood, sheets of plywood, at a cost of \$80 per sheet, when they could have purchased them locally for less than \$20 a sheet," she said.

"What we (are) seeing in the war on terrorism is that (there are) a lot of different companies that are profiting. Brown and Root is special because it has this relationship with Vice President Cheney," she added.

Major Bill Bigelow, a public relations officer for the U.S. Military at the Ramstein Air Base in Germany, which oversees much of the work at Incirlik, defends the Army: "If you're going to ask a specific question like, do you think it's right that contractors profit in wartime, I would think that might be better (asked) at a higher level, to people who set the policy. We don't set the policy, we work within the framework that's been established," he said.

"And of course those questions have been asked forever, because they go back to World War II, when Chrysler, Ford and Chevy stopped making cars and started making guns and tanks. Obviously it's a question that's been around for quite some time. But it's true that nowadays, there are very few defense contractors, if you will, but go back 60 years to the World War II era almost everybody was manufacturing something that either directly or indirectly had something to do with defense," he added.



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