

Statement of Senator Barack Obama
Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing
“Abuses in Private Security and Reconstruction Contracting in Iraq:
Ensuring Accountability, Protecting Whistleblowers”
September 21, 2007

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing today and for allowing me to submit a statement for the record. I appreciate your efforts to gather more information about abuses in private security and reconstruction contracting in Iraq. I also appreciate the willingness of the panelists to provide their perspectives on this important topic.

I was disturbed by recent press accounts describing a firefight in which Blackwater USA security contractors killed at least 9 people and wounded many others. According to the Iraqi government, last weekend’s incident is one of seven incidents in which the company’s employees have allegedly opened fire on Iraqi civilians.

This recent incident, which is under investigation by the Department of State, raises larger questions about the role of private security contractors. An estimated 48,000 private security employees are operating in Iraq, and more than 1,000 contractors have died in Iraq since 2003. Little is known about what functions these security contractors are performing, how much their services are costing, what military and safety equipment they are provided, and what rules of engagement they are following. And according to press accounts, Blackwater has been exempt from military regulations governing other security companies, such as restrictions on the use of offensive weapons, requirements to report shooting incidents, or abiding by a central tracking system that allows commanders to monitor the movements of security companies on the battlefield.

In February, I introduced the Transparency and Accountability in Military and Security Contracting Act (S. 674). This bill would require federal agencies to report to Congress on: the total number of security contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan; the total cost of the contractors; the number of contractors killed or wounded; information about the military and safety equipment provided to contractors; and a description of disciplinary action taken against contractors. The bill also would improve coordination between security contractors and U.S. armed forces by requiring the issuance of rules of engagement, clarify the legal status of contractors, and require investigation of criminal misconduct committed by contractors.

I have offered this legislation as an amendment to the FY 2008 Defense Authorization bill, which is currently before the Senate. I also sent a letter earlier this week to U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, calling on him to answer questions about the Blackwater incident and the role of private security contractors and the impact of their operations in Iraq.

We need to make sure that security contractors in Iraq are subject to adequate and transparent oversight and that their actions do not have a negative impact on our efforts to bring the war in Iraq to a responsible end. I look forward to working with all of you on this important issue.