

THE NATIONAL LAW REVIEW

Contractor Deaths in Afghanistan Illustrate the Grave Risks for Those Operating in Conflict Zones

Friday, February 17, 2012

The *New York Times* published an article yesterday that reflects the changing nature of the threat in Afghanistan from the public to the private sector as the U.S. military pulls out more soldiers. There are many forms that this risk takes, but the most obvious is deaths. And in 2011, for the first time, there were more civilian contractors working for U.S. companies that died in Afghanistan than there were U.S. soldiers.

[Rod Nordlan of the Times reports.](#)

“By continuing to outsource high-risk jobs that were previously performed by soldiers, the military, in effect, is privatizing the ultimate sacrifice,” said Steven L. Schooner, a law professor at George Washington University who has [studied the civilian casualties](#) issue.

Last year, at least 430 employees of American contractors were reported killed in Afghanistan: 386 working for the Defense Department, 43 for the United States Agency for International Development and one for the State Department, according to data provided by the American Embassy in Kabul and [publicly available in part](#) from the [United States Department of Labor](#).

The piece goes on to break down the statistics further.

There were 113,491 employees of defense contractors in Afghanistan as of January 2012, compared with about 90,000 American soldiers, according to [Defense Department statistics](#). Of those, 25,287, or about 22 percent of the employees, were American citizens, with 47 percent Afghans and 31 percent from other countries.

The bulk of the known contractor deaths are concentrated among a handful of major companies, particularly those providing interpreters, drivers, security guards and other support personnel who are particularly vulnerable to attacks.

The biggest contractor in terms of war zone deaths is apparently the defense giant L-3 Communications. If L-3 were a country, it would have the third highest loss of life in Afghanistan as well as in Iraq; only the United States and Britain would exceed it in fatalities.

Over the past 10 years, L-3 and its subsidiaries, including Titan Corporation and MPRI Inc., had at least 370 workers killed and 1,789 seriously wounded or injured through the end of 2011 in Iraq and Afghanistan, [records show](#). In a statement, a spokeswoman for L-3, Jennifer Barton, said: “L-3 is proud to have the opportunity to support the U.S. and coalition efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. We mourn the loss of life of these dedicated men and women.”

Obviously, an employee or contractor dying is a worst-case scenario for any company that operates in a conflict



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zone. But a few years ago, we looked at the specifics of the other threats that risk managers working for [employers whose business bring them to the world's most dangerous locations](#).

An insurer's or risk manager's goals in a post-conflict region do not differ significantly from their goals in any region. The risk assessment process is basically the same: (1) identify the risks (2) quantify the risks, (3) control/reduce the risks, (4) verify losses, and (5) mitigate future risks based on lessons learned. The major difference, however, is that the risks involved are far from ordinary.

Transportation and construction risks reign paramount, and these, combined with the ever-present threats of theft and criminal activity in a region where the rule of law has been fractured, exacerbate the many challenges of operating in a post-conflict region.

Roadway conditions are often abysmal and simple traffic controls are universally absent. This means that accidents are both more frequent and more likely to cause greater loss of life and property.

Bridges, culverts, tunnels and any other infrastructure in frequent use should be inspected with great care. The Salang Tunnel, for example, sits more than 11,000 feet above the Hindu Kush Mountains in Northern Afghanistan. As the main road connecting northern and southern Afghanistan, it is the world's highest road tunnel. However, the entire southern entrance and ventilation system of the tunnel had been destroyed during the conflict with the former Soviet Union and subsequent fighting between the Taliban and Northern Alliance.

In December 2001, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provided funding to the French-based Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED) to clear the tunnel. In conjunction with the Afghan Ministry of Public Works, ACTED discharged the rubble clogging the tunnel and removed nearby landmines and unexploded bombs, mortars, rockets and other munitions. Although, commercial and military traffic began using the tunnel again in January 2002, USAID still must provide \$1.6 million per year for snow clearance, emergency repairs and general traffic control just to keep the road passable.

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