

Full Spectrum Mercenaries: Blackwater Goes to Mexico

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Global Research, November 11, 2007

Conterpunch.org 9 November 2007

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

If and when private security contractor Blackwater USA and its heavily-armed operatives are forced to pull out of Iraq as the result of the September 16th rampage in downtown Baghdad when its employees massacred up to 28 Iraqis, Mexico could be a profitable option for the North Carolina-based company.

Actually, Blackwater is almost in Mexico already. For months, the North Carolina-based corporation has been pressuring local San Diego officials to grant it an operating license for an 824-acre training site to be known as Blackwater West in Potrero California 45 miles east of that bustling port city but only six miles from the Tecate Mexico border crossing. The site, some of which snakes through the Cleveland National Forest, is a favored transit route for undocumented Mexican workers heading north and has been recently scorched by out-of-control wildfires.

Blackwater USA's plans have drawn the ire of locals who are not happy about having 15 firing ranges in earshot and a coalition of homeowners, local farmers, environmentalists, and peaceniks has been pieced together to oppose the project. Nonetheless, Blackwater has kept up a full court press on county officials, even sailing the company yacht flying a humongous Blackwater flag, into a local marina last spring and inviting members of the planning commission aboard for cocktails.

Blackwater USA is attracted to the San Diego area because of the heavy concentration of military bases such as Camp Pendleton in the environs that could produce a windfall of security and training contracts from its pals in the Pentagon. Blackwater USA was founded by ex-Navy Seal Eric Prince who cultivates close ties with the military.

One of Blackwater's most rah-rah backers in the Potrero venture is local congressman Duncan Hunter, ranking republican on the House Armed Services Committee and a dark horse candidate for his party's presidential nomination. Hunter is considered one of the most virulent anti-Mexican immigration voices in congress and is a political architect of the separation wall that now lines California's border with Mexico.

The dispute over Blackwater's proposed Potrero training camp is not just a NIMBY-type confrontation. Siting the facility a stone's throw from the Mexican border internationalizes the proposition. By any stretch of the imagination, Mexican president Felipe Calderon ought to be nervous about the encampment of the world's largest private army on his conflictive northern border, particularly one that is not accountable to either the Geneva Convention or U.S. and Mexican military and civil law. Yet Calderon has not publically protested the proposal.

Situated in rugged high desert terrain, Potrero is an idyllic hideaway to train a new generation of Rambos - one can imagine guest motivational appearances by Sylvester Stallone and California's action figure governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. The camp which, in addition to multiple shooting ranges, will house an armory and feature both a 33,000 square foot urban counter-insurgency set and a course where armed vehicles seek to evade a paint ball barrage, is expected to train military and law enforcement personnel as well as private paramilitary security forces.

Blackwater USA has trained dozens of police forces at its Moyock North Carolina complex in the heart of that state's Great Dismal Swamp, including big city (New York, Washington DC, Los Angeles and Chicago) officers as well as rural forces like the Maricopa County Arizona sheriff's department. Maricopa County, which includes Phoenix, is a first stop for undocumented Mexican migrants and the local police have been deputized to assist the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) to corral the "indocumentados."

Blackwater USA's strategic position overlooking the Mexican border in Potrero presents inviting economic opportunities. Testifying before congress in 2005, then-Blackwater president Gary Jackson said that the North Carolina enterprise was prepared to provide assistance on border security and long-time connections inside DHS could generate lucrative contracts training increasingly heavily-armed ICE agents. San Diego congressperson Bob Filner, a Democrat told Salon Magazine's Elaine Zimmerman last month that he believes Blackwater is positioning itself to move into the border security business.

As the National Guard troops brought back from Iraq by George Bush to patrol the border and appease fellow-republicans like Hunter are drawn down (3000 have already been pulled back), Blackwater USA is poised to fill in the gap. Blackwater would also be useful in strengthening security at troubled immigration detention centers along the border, more than half of which have already been privatized.

In an October 15th Wall Street Journal interview Prince indicated that Iraq-type operations were no longer at the top of Blackwater USA's business agenda and that he saw his company as going more "full spectrum." Now, as they move into their new facility on the Mexican border, Eric Prince & Company appear to be set to expand into both border enforcement and the Bush White House drug war with an operational role in Plan Mexico, the \$1.5 billion U.S.-Mexico drug war scheme to fuse drug-fighting agencies on both sides of the border under Washington's control.

Despite repeated advisories from the White House that Plan Mexico is a done deal, Bush and Calderon have yet to formalize the pact, pending approval by the U.S. Congress.

The request for three half billion dollar Plan Mexico pay-outs through 2009 was sent on to congress folded into a near \$50 billion supplemental spending bill to finance Bush's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan but given Democratic aversion to funding these failed military escapades in an election year, passage is not assured. Plan Mexico has spread widespread suspicion south of the border with many Mexicans condemning the project as a grievous violation of national sovereignty.

Modeled on Washington's flawed Plan Colombia, which has pumped billions into that South American nation to bolster the right-wing regime of Alvaro Uribe, one of Bush's few allies in

the hemisphere, Plan Mexico will supply this not-so-distant neighbor nation with upgraded military hardware and cutting edge technological savvy - the New York-based Verint Technology is already installing a voice-activated "communication interruption" system that will audit all phone and e-mail traffic in Mexico and to the U.S. The surveillance technology, which is being bankrolled by a U.S. State Department grant, appears to be as much in violation of the Mexican constitution as Bush's massive, secret surveillance dragnet of his own citizens violates the U.S. magna carta.

Unlike Plan Colombia, Plan Mexico does not contemplate the stationing of U.S. troops on Mexican soil. Such an adventure would be universally unpopular here - the U.S. has invaded Mexico eight times since this country won its independence in 1821. To insure that U.S. military personnel stays on their side of the line, Mexican drug fighters are trained out of country, mainly at the Center for Special Forces in Fort Bragg North Carolina (100 miles as the crow flies from Blackwater's Moyock complex.)

Nonetheless, as the military pares itself down and outsources its services, training Mexican troops is a role that a new "full-spectrum" Blackwater USA seems perfectly positioned to assume at the Potrero site. Because it is not formally a part of the U.S. military, Blackwater could also infiltrate personnel across the border for on-site engagement inside Mexico.

Coincidentally, according to a recent report in the Army Times (Sept. 14th), Blackwater USA has just been handed a sizeable chunk of a \$15 billion USD drug war grant by the Department of Defense (Raytheon is another big winner.) Part of the Blackwater boodle is slated for the design of an unmanned aerostat surveillance platform that has been subcontracted with the Maryland-based Arinc Corporation. The "blimp" project (if that what is being proposed) marks a radical departure for Eric Prince's conglom, which has never before been a supplier of technology to the military.

According to the Army Times report, the DOD grant mandates Blackwater USA "to deploy surveillance techniques, train foreign security forces, and provide logistical and operational support" for drug war initiatives.

Founded in 1996 by Prince and a handful of ex-Navy Seal buddies, Blackwater USA's business boomed in the wake of 9/11 and it is heavily invested in Bush's War on Terror. Drug war operations represent a field in which Blackwater has little experience but which, logistically at least, is not much different from the security firm's terror war duties. In recent years, the White House has done its damndest to conflate the War on Drugs with the War on Terror.

Blackwater USA's enlistment in the drug war is a direct challenge to its stiffest competitor, DynCorp - up until now, the Dallas-based corporation has locked up 94% of all private drug war security contracts.

Blackwater USA's move into combating narco-terrorism will give the North Carolina outfit a foot up in Latin America where the private security industry is flourishing. Blackwater now employs 1200 Chileans, ex-members of dictator Augusto Pinochet's military, in its international operations - in addition to its contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan, Blackwater provides security for high officials in Azerbaijan, Jordan, and Bokano Faso among other governments.

But Blackwater USA's Colombian subsidiary, ID Systems, ran into a storm of criticism when it

recruited 20 ex-military officers for the company's Iraq operation - the recruits now claim that they were paid less than half of what their contracts called for and were kept by Blackwater USA in Iraq against their wills.

Under the U.S.'s post 9/11 security redesign, military protection of the homeland has become the province of the newly created North Command, now housed in a Colorado bunker. Within the North Command's schema, Mexico forms a major portion of the U.S.'s southern security perimeter but with the U.S. military severely restricted in its abilities to put Special Forces on Mexican soil to combat the terrorists, narco or otherwise, Blackwater USA, perched as it is on the border at its Potrero California training camp and equipped with multi-million dollar DOD grants, stands ready to provide logistical and operational support to further Washington's designs on Mexico and the South.

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