

Halliburton affiliate tabbed to build immigration jails

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A Houston-based construction firm with ties to the White House has been awarded an open-ended contract to build immigration detention centers that could total \$385 million a move that some critics called questionable.

The contract calls for KBR, a subsidiary of oil engineering and construction giant Halliburton, to build temporary detention facilities in the event of an “immigration emergency,” according to U.S. officials.

“If, for example, there were some sort of upheaval in another country that would cause mass migration, that’s the type of situation that this contract would address,” said Jamie Zuieback of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. “Essentially, this is a contingency contract.”

Under the contract, which was awarded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, KBR could also be tasked to operate one or more temporary detention facilities, and to develop a plan for responding to a natural disaster in which ICE personnel participate in relief efforts. The contract, which does not specify locations for the detention facilities, is good for one year, with the option for four, one-year extensions.

The open-ended nature of the contract described as “indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity” raises concerns about overcharging and other potential abuse, said Charlie Cray, director of the Washington-based Center for Corporate Policy and a frequent Halliburton critic.

The Government Accounting Office has criticized both Halliburton and KBR for cost overruns and inappropriately obtaining government projects under a similar contingency-based program connected to reconstruction work in Iraq, Cray said. The companies’ work in Iraq has ranged from providing meals for soldiers to planning for troops to occupy Iraqi oil fields.

Halliburton’s billions of dollars in revenue from federal contracts, many of them awarded without competitive bidding, have made it a frequent target of critics who accuse the Bush administration of cronyism.

Vice President Dick Cheney is Halliburton’s former CEO.

KBR also has faced allegations that, through subcontractors, it hired numerous illegal immigrants to perform rebuilding work in the Gulf Coast region following Hurricane Katrina, and paid them sub-minimum wages. The company’s hiring practices in Iraq have come under scrutiny for the alleged exploitation of foreign workers.

But KBR officials said the contract for detention facilities is well-deserved, because of the firm's experience in building infrastructure and support networks for U.S. military and law enforcement.

KBR's revenues totaled \$3 billion in the fourth quarter of 2005, according to company figures released Friday, and Halliburton plans to sell part of the subsidiary through an initial public offering in the coming months.

"We are especially gratified to be awarded this contract because it builds on our extremely strong track record in the arena of emergency operations support," said Bruce Stanski, KBR's vice president of government and infrastructure, in a statement.

There's no guarantee that any work will be performed under the contract; if no immigration emergency or natural disaster occurs, there won't be anything for KBR to do, said company spokeswoman Cathy Mann.

However, outside events have prompted large waves of migration in the past. Political upheaval and changes in immigration policy in nations such as Haiti, Cuba and Rwanda caused an influx of immigrants and refugees from those countries at different times.

Additionally, ICE is planning to increase the capacity of its detention facilities around the country, Zuieback said, particularly after Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff pledged to end the agency's unofficial "catch-and-release" policy for some illegal immigrants.

Because ICE's detention facilities are frequently full, there is nowhere to hold illegal immigrants who must go through an immigration hearing before they can be deported which include most immigrants from nations other than Mexico. In the past, those undocumented migrants have been issued an order to appear for their court date, and then simply released into the United States. Most of them never show up for the hearings.

While increasing the number of beds available in detention facilities would address the issue, Zuieback said the department also is working on agreements with several other countries that would allow the expedited deportation of illegal aliens from those nations without the requirement for a hearing in front of an immigration judge.

"Part of the reason why expedited removal is so important is you can create more beds by moving those people out of there faster," she said.

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