

Homeland Security Contracts for Vast New Detention Camps

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Global Research, February 06, 2006

Pacific News Service 6 February 2006

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Editor's Note: A little-known \$385 million contract for Halliburton subsidiary KBR to build detention facilities for "an emergency influx of immigrants" is another step down the Bush administration's road toward martial law, the writer says.

A Halliburton subsidiary has just received a \$385 million contract from the Department of Homeland Security to provide "temporary detention and processing capabilities."

The contract — announced Jan. 24 by the engineering and construction firm KBR — calls for preparing for "an emergency influx of immigrants, or to support the rapid development of new programs" in the event of other emergencies, such as "a natural disaster." The release offered no details about where Halliburton was to build these facilities, or when.

To date, some newspapers have worried that open-ended provisions in the contract could lead to cost overruns, such as have occurred with KBR in Iraq. A Homeland Security spokesperson has responded that this is a "contingency contract" and that conceivably no centers might be built. But almost no paper so far has discussed the possibility that detention centers could be used to detain American citizens if the Bush administration were to declare martial law.

For those who follow covert government operations abroad and at home, the contract evoked ominous memories of Oliver North's controversial Rex-84 "readiness exercise" in 1984. This called for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to round up and detain 400,000 imaginary "refugees," in the context of "uncontrolled population movements" over the Mexican border into the United States. North's activities raised civil liberties concerns in both Congress and the Justice Department. The concerns persist.

"Almost certainly this is preparation for a roundup after the next 9/11 for Mid-Easterners, Muslims and possibly dissenters," says Daniel Ellsberg, a former military analyst who in 1971 released the Pentagon Papers, the U.S. military's account of its activities in Vietnam. "They've already done this on a smaller scale, with the 'special registration' detentions of immigrant men from Muslim countries, and with Guantanamo."

Plans for detention facilities or camps have a long history, going back to fears in the 1970s of a national uprising by black militants. As Alonzo Chardy reported in the Miami Herald on July 5, 1987, an executive order for continuity of government (COG) had been drafted in 1982 by FEMA head Louis Giuffrida. The order called for "suspension of the Constitution" and "declaration of martial law." The martial law portions of the plan were outlined in a memo by Giuffrida's deputy, John Brinkerhoff.

In 1985, President Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive 188, one of a series of directives that authorized continued planning for COG by a private parallel government.

Two books, James Mann's "Rise of the Vulcans" and James Bamford's "A Pretext for War," have revealed that in the 1980s this parallel structure, operating outside normal government channels, included the then-head of G. D. Searle and Co., Donald Rumsfeld, and then-Congressman from Wyoming Dick Cheney.

After 9/11, new martial law plans began to surface similar to those of FEMA in the 1980s. In January 2002 the Pentagon submitted a proposal for deploying troops on American streets. One month later John Brinkerhoff, the author of the 1982 FEMA memo, published an article arguing for the legality of using U.S. troops for purposes of domestic security.

Then in April 2002, Defense Dept. officials implemented a plan for domestic U.S. military operations by creating a new U.S. Northern Command (CINC-NORTHCOM) for the continental United States. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld called this "the most sweeping set of changes since the unified command system was set up in 1946."

The NORTHCOM commander, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced, is responsible for "homeland defense and also serves as head of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD)... He will command U.S. forces that operate within the United States in support of civil authorities. The command will provide civil support not only in response to attacks, but for natural disasters."

John Brinkerhoff later commented on PBS that, "The United States itself is now for the first time since the War of 1812 a theater of war. That means that we should apply, in my view, the same kind of command structure in the United States that we apply in other theaters of war."

Then in response to Hurricane Katrina in Sept. 2005, according to the Washington Post, White House senior adviser Karl Rove told the governor of Louisiana, Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, that she should explore legal options to impose martial law "or as close as we can get." The White House tried vigorously, but ultimately failed, to compel Gov. Blanco to yield control of the state National Guard.

Also in September, NORTHCOM conducted its highly classified Granite Shadow exercise in Washington. As William Arkin reported in the Washington Post, "Granite Shadow is yet another new Top Secret and compartmented operation related to the military's extra-legal powers regarding weapons of mass destruction. It allows for emergency military operations in the United States without civilian supervision or control."

It is clear that the Bush administration is thinking seriously about martial law.

Many critics have alleged that FEMA's spectacular failure to respond to Katrina followed from a deliberate White House policy: of paring back FEMA, and instead strengthening the military for responses to disasters.

A multimillion program for detention facilities will greatly increase NORTHCOM's ability to respond to any domestic disorders.

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