

Military contractors eye Africa again

By [Global Research](#)

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European mercenaries, the notorious “Dogs of War,” came to prominence in Africa in the 1960s when the mineral-rich continent was convulsed by wars and revolutions as Britain, France and [Belgium](#) relinquished their vast colonies.

Western soldiers of fortune like Britain’s “Mad Mike” Hoare, Bob Denard of France and the Belgian, “Black Jack” Schramme, became household names as they fought for one African dictator or another to grab Africa’s riches.

In the 1980s and ’90s, the mercenaries metamorphosed into their modern incarnation of “private military companies,” headed by outfits like Executive Outcomes and Sandline, hired to protect oil, diamond and copper interests for global conglomerates or to crush rebellions by power-hungry tribal tyrants.

International opprobrium and a slew of legislation by countries such as South Africa, once a haven for the mercenaries, severely curbed their activities. But these privateers, particularly U.S. companies such as Blackwater, DynCorp and Vinnell Corp., found themselves with a goldmine in Iraq and Afghanistan, where their combined strength often matched the U.S. military presence. Trigger-happy personnel and questionable financial dealings gave this new generation of mercenaries a black name as well.

Now, as the [United States](#) prepares to pull out most of its forces in Iraq, mercenaries are mustering for another move into Africa, courtesy of the new combat command established by the [George W. Bush](#) administration, the U.S. Africa Command, universally known as Africom.

Its main mission is to work with African militaries to [improve security](#) to counter encroachment by al-Qaida. But it is also designed to protect Africa’s oil wealth, upon which the United States increasingly relies. But Africom is also charged with helping development programs — and oddly enough, that’s where the military contractors see the prospect of big bucks.

It was, then, not so strange to find scores of representatives from the plethora of security companies that were spawned by Bush’s war against terrorism, with its vast [outsourcing](#) program, gathered at, of all things, the annual meeting of the International Peace Operations Association in Washington a few weeks ago.

“Everybody’s always been interested in Africa,” former Blackwater executive [Chris Taylor](#) told the Mother Jones Web site. “It represents a huge opportunity for business.”

Africom’s diplomacy-driven development [operation](#), it seems, was the magnet. Of particular

interest was a U.S. State Department contract, the Africa Peacekeeping Program, worth around \$1 billion over five years. It covers everything from logistics and construction, training courses for African troops, aerial surveillance missions and bolstering coastal security.

That last issue is of special concern because of the rampant piracy off war-ravaged Somalia in the Gulf of Aden and, on the western side of the continent, increasing oil theft in the oil-rich Gulf of Guinea. Oil theft there costs Nigeria an estimated \$2 billion a year.

At another recent gathering in South Africa, naval commanders from 33 of the continent's 54 states agreed on the urgent need to cooperate to counter an unprecedented surge in criminal activity that includes piracy, smuggling trafficking and pollution, including the dumping of toxic waste.

Toxic waste dumping is becoming a major problem in Africa's poorly policed waters in the Atlantic and Indian oceans. Another threat is large-scale fishing by European fleets off Africa, which is depleting stocks at such a rate that local fishing industries are collapsing. West Africa loses \$170 million annually because of illegal fishing, which it is powerless to prevent.

"We as navy leaders must collectively impress on our political leaders the need to invest in adequately equipped navies to ensure security in our waters," Vice Admiral Johannes Mudimu, commander of South Africa's navy, told the Sea Power for Africa symposium in March.

A week earlier the Nigerian navy took delivery of two new 115-foot Manta-class offshore patrol craft and two Agusta helicopters to beef up its maritime presence in the Niger Delta, epicenter of that nation's oil industry. The purchase of the Mantas was financed by the state-run Nigerian National Petroleum Corp.

That's one pointer to how the new-age mercenaries, the private military companies, could do business with African states under Africom's diplomatic umbrella while the bulk of U.S. forces concentrate on the war in Afghanistan-Pakistan.

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