

The Guards, Cooks, and Cleaners of the Afghan War: Migrant Contractors and the Cost of War

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Three Years in an Afghan Prison

For close to three years in an Afghan prison, Teer Magar, a Nepali laborer, spoke to almost no one.² His only visitor was a French representative from the Red Cross, who occasionally managed to send some letters home to his wife in Nepal. The few words of Pashto he was able to pick up allowed for limited communication with his guards and fellow inmates, but mostly he kept to himself. During his trial, he had no Nepali translator, and it was difficult for him to plead his case or even understand the charges.

It did not seem to bother the other prisoners, mostly Taliban, that he had worked as a contractor for an American construction firm. At one point early in his detention, a large bearded Talib had come to him and demanded that he convert to Islam, Teer recalled. Teer tried to explain to the prisoner that he respected all religions. He wasn't sure if the Talib understood him, but after a short while, he was left alone.

The prison was comfortable and clean by Afghan standards. Newly built by the British, it was one of dozens of structures built for the Afghan government by the international community during the war to house opposition force detainees. It seemed to Teer, however, that most were simply local farmers who had been inadvertently dragged into the conflict, perhaps found with guns in their homes when the Americans went out on raids. In this sense, Teer fit in with the others, who felt confused and unjustly detained.

The local office of the American construction firm he had been working for had been accused by a rival firm of spying for the Pakistanis in the hopes of stealing some of their business. When the Afghan secret police raided the firm's office, amidst the confusion, the Afghans in the office had managed to make it look like Teer had been stealing plans for the

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² Names and some identifying details have been altered to preserve anonymity.

bases they were building. With no translator during his trial, and no real sense of what was happening, Teer was sentenced to eighteen years for espionage. There was no Nepali embassy to intervene on his behalf and after one phone call from a lawyer representing the company he had been working for, he received no additional support. Instead he was left in prison for two and a half years, until a Nepali reporter happened to hear of his plight and began working to secure his release.

Teer was one of two hundred and fifty contractors who provide labor for America's war in Afghanistan whom I interviewed in 2015 and 2016 in their home communities in Nepal, India, Turkey, and the UK. This number is just a small fraction of the tens of thousands of laborers who travel from these and other countries, such as Bangladesh, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Colombia, to work on military bases and for firms contracting from the United States military, sometimes in dangerous and exploitative conditions. Teer's case was more distressing than most, and many foreign contractors in Afghanistan earned higher wages than what they would have made in Nepal or other countries of origin. Yet most had paid high fees to brokers and bribes to government officials in order to secure these work opportunities, and they worked in far more dangerous positions and earned far less than they had been promised, some ending up deeply in debt.

Oftentimes segregated from US and allied troops, sometimes on remote bases, these workers have rarely been covered in the international media or by other researchers and their suffering remains one of the hidden costs of America's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

An Outsourced War

America's wars following the attacks of September 2001 are notable for the fact that their impacts ripple in virtually every corner of the globe. They are also remarkable for how the costs of these wars – from the financial to public health to human rights – have been difficult to track, hidden by opaque government accounting.³ Teer's story illustrates another war cost that has received very little attention: the impact on war zone laborers from third party countries (often referred to in military and diplomatic circles as "Third Country Nationals," or TCNs). These international workers provide a range of services from working as private security contractors to providing much of the labor on various American bases as cooks, cleaners and construction workers, often times for as little as a few hundred dollars a month. There are thousands of these hidden laborers, and this report explains how difficult it is to calculate their exact numbers, or how many of them have been wounded or died as a result of the fighting.

The US's increasing reliance on private contracting has made those involved in supplying this labor vulnerable in ways that are very different from the dangers faced by

³ The Watson Institute's most recent estimate of the present and future obligated financial costs of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is \$4.79 trillion USD and counting (Crawford, 2016).

traditional soldiers. Another laborer, Kusang, came from a poor family in southern Nepal. His father took out a loan to pay a trafficker to secure him work in Afghanistan as a kitchen worker. First, however, Kusang was made to wait in India, where he fell deeper into debt. When he arrived at the international military base in Afghanistan to which he had been assigned, he was told that his salary would be \$350 a month, not the \$500 promised. After complaining, he was told that if he didn't like it, he could walk out the door – an impossibility in the middle of a war zone.

At the base, as one of the lowest ranking contractors, Kusang was told he was a security risk. As a result, he was not allowed to have a cell phone or use the internet, making it impossible to contact home. He was also not given a work permit, which he was told was unnecessary. However, it was clear that companies benefited by not securing the proper documents for their workers – if Kusang had left the base, he could have been arrested by Afghan police, so the lack of documents made it impossible for him to find work elsewhere, effectively forcing him to remain on the base until he had paid off his debt.

Kusang worked ten-hour shifts cleaning the kitchen, hauling boxes and doing other tasks for the three years that he remained on the base, with no days off. He lived in a small section of a shipping container that he shared with three other workers. As a Nepali, which put him at a lower status than workers from other countries like India, for example, he was forced to do the most unpleasant tasks. On one occasion, he said, his boss beat him while other higher status workers laughed. Constantly worried about termination, he felt he had little recourse.

For workers like Kusang, the temporary nature of their contracts means companies can dismiss them at any moment, making them unable to complain about dangerous conditions or advocate for improvements. If workers are injured, companies may not provide them with adequate medical attention much less long-term care. Furthermore, the nature of contracting and subcontracting makes it difficult to monitor and protect these workers. While it is often assumed that it is safer to be a contractor than a soldier in conflict zones, there is little evidence to support this. Countries like Nepal, which has no diplomatic presence in Afghanistan or Iraq, have difficulty protecting the rights of their citizens. Meanwhile, the US government is not doing enough to monitor the plights of international contractors. These patterns often mean that it is the workers who assume the most risk, while those who control access to contracts, like brokers and government officials, are the ones to benefit.⁴

Murky Accounts

One of the primary challenges in attempting to understand the impact of the war on the lives of international contractors is the dearth of data. This is in part because the US government (and the governments of Afghanistan and the countries where the laborers

⁴ See Coburn (2016b) and Coburn (2018).

come from), have little incentive or capacity for tracking these workers. At the same time, several conditions in the contracting industry, where companies are concerned about competition from other firms and negative media attention – particularly since Blackwater killed 17 civilians in Nissour Square in Iraq in 2007 – leads them to be highly secretive.

Simply determining the number of international contractors involved in the war in Afghanistan is almost impossible. The US Department of Defense (DoD), which hires the most international contractors, also keeps the most reliable numbers in its monthly reports to Congress. In March 2012, when the US had 88,000 soldiers deployed in Afghanistan, the Department of Defense had 117,227 contractors. Only a third of them were American, with the rest from Afghanistan or other countries (Peters, Schwartz, & Kapp, 2015, p. 3).⁵

This figure, however, does not include tens of thousands of others who were on contracts for the Department of State, USAID, the Drug Enforcement Administration or any of a dozen other separate American agencies working in the country. Some of these organizations keep separate tallies, but most do not. Even when figures are available, these statistics were often rife with errors. For example, the Department of Defense admitted they had missed counting 50 percent of the contracting population in one report (United States Department of Defense, 2010). The Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, the US's lead oversight body for reconstruction in Afghanistan, after citing Department of Defense numbers, complained that: "We could not obtain similar data for the number of non-Afghan contractors supporting State and USAID" (SIGAR, 2013). To demonstrate how widely contracting estimates can vary, the Iraq Study Group estimated in 2006 that there were 5,000 civilian contractors from Iraq, the US and other countries in the country, while Central Command released a review reporting that there were 100,000 government contractors in Iraq and the Associated Press, three months later, put the number at 120,000 (Isenberg, 2009, p. 8).

Furthermore, these contractor estimates do not include civilians on contracts with the U.N., the World Bank, the British government, the Canadian government or any of the other large donor countries in Afghanistan.⁶ It also does not include the group of civilian workers, often intermingled with these contractors, who provide indirect services for the internationals in Afghanistan during the war, whether they are workers setting up the booming cell phone industry, driven by international dollars, or the influx of sex workers

⁵ This figure comes from the Department of Defense's 'Boots on the Ground,' monthly report to Congress, compiled by the Congressional Research Service in Peters, Schwartz, & Kapp. Complete figures, only for contractors working for the Department of Defense, are available at: http://www.acq.osd.mil/log/ps/centcom_reports.html.

⁶ The US military tends to outsource more regularly than other states, but it is far from alone in the practice. For some more comparative analysis see Krahnemann (2010) and Dunigan & Petersohn, eds. (2015).

providing services for soldiers, contractors and others that are prevalent in most conflict zones.⁷

The countries supplying labor to the war in Afghanistan are even less reliable in their reports on the number of laborers working in conflict zones. The annual report from the Department of Foreign Employment in Nepal, for example, says it issued 605 permits in 2015 (598 for men and seven for women) (Government of Nepal Ministry of Labour and Employment, n.d.). Yet a survey that I conducted in 2015-16 suggested that at the height of the intervention in 2010 and 2011, there were multiple companies employing 1,000 Nepalis each, along with numerous smaller companies employing smaller numbers, suggesting a total of no fewer than 10,000 Nepalis in the country and probably closer to 15,000 at the highest point.⁸ This suggests the Nepali government's figures represented fewer than 10 percent of the Nepalis actually working in Afghanistan. Most of the contractors I interviewed claimed the Department of Foreign Employment was corrupt and that the registration process was really just another opportunity for brokers and corrupt officials to charge migrant workers a fee. Most workers took measures to avoid detection by the Nepali government.

If determining the number of contractors involved in the war is difficult, tracking contractor casualties and injuries is even more challenging. In the course of my research, I found dozens of contractors who had been injured or killed in everything from roadside bombs to rocket attacks. These cases make it difficult to believe some of the looser figures gathered by government agencies. For example, the US Department of Labor keeps figures for those claiming workplace injury compensation (*About the Defense Base Act Case Summary Reports*, n.d.; *Defense Base Act Case Summary by Employer (09/01/2001 - 12/31/2015)*, n.d.); according to these numbers, 3,712 American and international contractors had been killed in Afghanistan, Iraq and Kuwait by the end of 2015. However, these reports include the disclaimer that they “do not constitute the complete or official casualty statistics of civilian contractor injuries and deaths.”⁹ This is in large part due to the fact that all of these US government statistics rely on contracting companies themselves to report any contractors killed or wounded.¹⁰

⁷ While these workers are rarely counted, a bipartisan Congressional committee did acknowledge the role of the US in encouraging this migration: “globalization of the world economy has spurred the movement of people across borders, legally and illegally, especially from poorer countries, to fill low-skill jobs in support of the US contingencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Exploitation includes forced labor, slavery, and sexual exploitation” (Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan, 2011, p. 92).

⁸ See Coburn (2018).

⁹ Notably, these are also the sources that the Department of Defense uses to count contractor fatalities (Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan, 2011, p. 31).

¹⁰ For more, see Lutz (2013).

When I interviewed Nepali contractors who had been injured in Afghanistan, I found that more often than not, their cases were not included in these numbers.¹¹ Figures from other agencies contradicted these reports and other agencies, like the Department of Defense, have only released numbers of American contractors killed or other particular slices of data. My Freedom of Information Act request for more data received no response. Ironically, USAID eventually hired a contracting company to keep an accurate count of the contractors working on their various projects.

One of the trends that the numbers do illustrate is that, far from a fading phenomenon, the drawdown of US troops has led to contractors taking on an even more important role in the war. In June 2015, there were 9,060 American soldiers in Afghanistan and 29,000 Department of Defense contractors, making contractors 76 percent of the Department of Defense presence (Peters, Schwartz and Kapp, 2015, p. 1).¹² This is the highest contractor-to-military personnel ratio of any conflict in US military history (United States Department of Defense, 2014, p. 10). As international contractors make up an even higher percentage of the US funded presence in Afghanistan, it becomes even more critical that we understand some of the consequences of this outsourcing of the conflict.

The Consequences of Invisible Labor

The absence of basic reliable numbers of international contractors working on US warzone contracts leaves us with a very incomplete picture of the ongoing effects of the wars.

The experience of Nepalis like Teer Magar and Kusang was fairly typical of many of the international contractors working in the post-9/11 war zones. While race, country of origin, class and other factors shaped how contractors fared, all shared some similar legal and physical vulnerabilities. Some worked for companies that failed to provide a minimum standard of living, with dangerous conditions essentially imprisoning contractors on bases making it impossible to leave. Beyond this, I interviewed contractors who had been held hostage by brokers, who had been robbed, and who had been forced to perform incredibly dangerous tasks not in their contracts. Most common were the more subtle forms of physical and economic exploitation that workers like Kusang faced.

¹¹ This is based on the fact that the compensation received by the workers was far lower than the amount stipulated by US law and were not comparable to cases I did find that had been processed through the Defense Base Act.

¹² There are similar trends in the number of contractors employed by other countries in conflict zones as the conflict winds down. The UK, for example, had 2,000 contractors supporting 46,000 troops deployed in Iraq in 2005, but that ratio had swung wildly by 2008, when the MOD listed 2,200 contractors supporting just 4,100 troops (Krahmann, 2010, p. 201-202).

While Teer's imprisonment was an extreme case, the rest of his story, like Kusang's, is emblematic of some of these typical forms of exploitation. Like many Nepalis, Teer went to Afghanistan hoping to find work as a private security guard. Nepal was a key supplier of private security contractors in large part due to Nepal's history of providing so-called "Gurkha" recruits to the British Army – a practice that dates back to 1816 and continues at lower levels today, with the British Army taking approximately 200 Nepali recruits a year. Despite this, most of those who ended up in Afghanistan actually had no experience in the British Army. Some have experience in the Nepali Army, but others were simply civilians relying on the colonial narratives about their Gurkha status to secure jobs. Private security firms in Iraq and Afghanistan early in the conflicts attempted to hire Nepali Gurkhas who had served in the British Army, but there were not enough of these veterans to satisfy demand and many were unwilling to put themselves in harm's way. Private security firms in Iraq and Afghanistan early in the wars tended to hire Nepali Gurkhas who had served in the British Army, but as the wars escalated, fewer of this same group were willing to put themselves in harm's way and companies realized they could save money by hiring Nepalis with less military experience (while still marketing them as "Gurkhas").¹³

Despite this, Teer and other young Nepalis still viewed work in the British Army as an ideal way to find prestigious and lucrative work abroad and in 2015 there were 6,000 applicants for just 200 spots in the British Army reserved for Nepali Gurkhas. For Teer and those others who had not been successful in the recruitment process, there were limited options. Most had left school or their family farms to take part in the selection process in Pokhara, Nepal, and would then go on to Kathmandu hoping to find a broker or manpower firm that would get them a job abroad. These services could cost as little as a thousand dollars or more than ten thousand depending upon the promised salary. Most young men, oftentimes with the support of their families, would take out loans to cover these payments. These young Nepali men and women end up in Gulf countries, Malaysia, and the Middle East.

The tens of thousands, like Teer, who ended up in Afghanistan, Iraq or other conflict zones face particular vulnerabilities. Teer, for example, arrived without a job and with only a 30-day visa. He stayed in a private labor camp run jointly by a Nepali and Afghan broker. These camps provided unemployed workers, often in the country illegally, a place to stay – often at exorbitant rates – while they looked for work. As the days passed, Teer's search for work grew more desperate, as overstaying a visa meant the threat of deportation and imprisonment in Afghanistan. Returning home was not an option since he was already deeply in debt from the fee he had paid the broker to bring him to Afghanistan.

¹³ The term Gurkha comes simply from the Nepali town of Gorkha. Nepalis serving in the Indian Army are generally referred to as "Gorkhas," though the term, in large part due to marketing by security firms, has become increasingly contested, with some Nepali contractors with no military experience being called Gurkhas, though British soldiers would reject this term. For more, see Coburn (2016b), Des Chene (1991) and Caplan (1995).

As Teer discovered, once in Afghanistan, there was little support for international contractors. With no embassy in the country, the Nepali embassy in Islamabad technically provided diplomatic representation for Nepali workers in Afghanistan, but in reality, the Nepali government had limited capacities. So Teer was given no diplomatic assistance during his trial and imprisonment. Similarly, for those workers who were paid less than promised, not given the proper work permits, forced to live in slum-like conditions or otherwise abused – all of which was reported on numerous occasions by those I interviewed – there was no recourse: the Nepali government provided no in-country support, the Afghan government was more likely to imprison the workers than help them, and the governments of the United States and other donor countries, the only actors with the real opportunity to help regulate the system, were disinterested. Worker protection is virtually absent for these contractors.

Monitoring the Costs of Outsourced War

Ultimately, it is impossible to do a complete reckoning of the costs to Nepali and other migrant laborers in conflict zones. In order to better protect these workers and understand the true impact of America's wars on a broader set of global citizens, a crucial first step is gathering data and promoting transparency.

To date, contracting companies have been unreliable when it comes to protecting the rights of these international contractors. Better monitoring and transparency around the role of international contractors will require cooperation from the countries providing labor (such as Nepal), the countries where those laborers are working (Afghanistan and other conflict zones) and, most importantly, the country funding most of these contracts, the United States. Initial attempts by private security firms to track the numbers of migrant contractors and their working conditions have not yielded significant results and right now there is virtually no cooperation between the US and countries like Nepal on the issue.

Workers would benefit enormously from the establishment of certain standards around work conditions and the use of brokers in the recruiting practice. The government in Nepal has shown some interest in trying to establish a list of companies to do not exploit workers, but ultimately, such approaches are unlikely to make progress if the US government is not more deeply involved in tracking and monitoring the work conditions of those earning US government dollars, laboring in conflict zones. Such information, publicly available, will also allow American citizens to better understand and debate the current US approach to war, which relies so heavily on outsourcing danger to poor, foreign workers.

Finally, better accounting practices that monitor numbers of contractors and track their wellbeing will at least allow workers to make better decisions and enter conflict zones aware of the risks they are taking. It will also allow their home countries and other organizations to better support these workers when they do encounter difficulties.

Until these or similar steps are taken, international contractors will remain one of the uncounted and unconsidered costs of America's wars.

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