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The New Mercenaries and the Privatization of Conflict

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In January 1999, the Ethiopian air force was proudly demonstrating its newly acquired Su-27 fighter-bombers when suddenly one aircraft lost an engine and plunged toward the ground. The pilot ejected in a burst of pyrotechnics and parachuted safely to a landing near the spectators, but when he removed his flight helmet a very European face emerged, that of Colonel Vyacheslav Myzin, formerly of the Russian air force. Colonel Myzin is one of the new mercenaries.[1]

A certain amount of near-hysteria has been generated in the past few years by the issue of privatized military elements such as the colonel, loosely characterized as mercenaries. The United Nations and some African states (some of whom hire mercenaries) have been especially vociferous in this regard. Nevertheless, the realities of the 21st century will make it inevitable that so-called mercenaries will play a greater role than in the past.

It is a very old practice for rulers to fight some or all of their wars by hiring foreigners, militarily skilled groups and individuals who have no special ideological stake in the conflict at hand. Loosely speaking, these hired soldiers are grouped together as "mercenaries." At the dawn of the 21st century, when various entities (states, corporations, political movements, etc.) find themselves in need of military or large-scale security services, hiring mercenaries is an obvious recourse. When even major states are reducing their armed forces and showing less interest in foreign military adventures because of pinched economic circumstances and a changed political environment, smaller states may be doubly motivated to go the presumably cheaper mercenary route. During the 1990s a number of corporations termed "international security firms" or "private military companies" have sprung up to service this demand. These are distinguished from ordinary security firms that provide building watchmen and the like, essentially private guards. Such local security firms have limited functions and neither use nor provide training in military methods, leadership, or equipment. The new international security firms, however, embody all those features.

A 1997 study by the private Center for Defense Information lists dozens of such organizations with international operations. South Africa has been the leading home of international security companies, including Executive Outcomes, Combat Force, Investments Surveys, Honey Badger Arms and Ammunition, Shield Security, Kas Enterprises, Saracen International, and Longreach Security. International military firms based in other parts of the world include Alpha Five, Corporate Trading International, Omega Support Ltd., Parasec Strategic Concept, Jardine Securicor Gurkha Services (Hong Kong), Gurkha Security Guards (Isle of Man, UK), Special Project Service Ltd. (UK), Defence Systems Ltd. (UK), Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), Vinnell Corporation (US), and Military Professional Resources Inc. (US).[2] Executive Outcomes (South Africa) has been described as "the world's first fully equipped corporate army." [3]

None of these would describe itself as a mercenary force, since the term is loaded with negative connotations. At best, it recalls images of colorful adventurers, not the sort of solid, reliable image these firms are anxious to project. The inexact term "mercenary" is often used as a term of opprobrium, applied to any police, military, or paramilitary which the user dislikes. At the extremes, it is applied to ordinary private guards and security personnel and to any person who is paid for military-related services, including the paid professional armies of modern nation-states.[4] For purposes of this discussion, we will use the ordinary language definition of a mercenary: individuals or organizations who sell their military skills outside their country of origin and as an entrepreneur rather than as a member of a recognized national military force. The particular emphasis here is on those groups organized as corporations that provide such services.

Growth, History, and Definitions

In 1994, the United Nations became sufficiently alarmed about the increasing use of mercenaries to appoint an official to investigate the issue. Enrique Bernales Ballesteros, the UN Special Rapporteur on Mercenaries, reported a growing number of hired fighters appearing in Zaire, Angola, Rwanda, Tajikistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, and former Yugoslavia. According to Ballesteros, there has been a "significant presence of mercenaries" in the armed conflicts in these countries. The report showed special concern about the involvement of large, well-organized, and well-equipped private military forces such as Executive Outcomes.[5]

This kind of alarm can be expected since the UN is an organization of states, and states have always jealously guarded their monopoly on the use of force, especially deadly force. This monopoly has emphatically included the right to create and employ military forces. In the UN view, mercenary activity is a violation of the principles of sovereign equality, political independence, and the territorial integrity of member states. But since hired fighters are most commonly used in intrastate conflicts, where rulers desperately need their services, little effective action has been taken. However, states are not the only customers for military skills. Mercenaries can be expected to become significant players in private, group, and corporate conflict, increasingly so if social destabilization increases, degrading the protective and policing capabilities of states. The early indications of this can be seen in reports of former military specialists ranging from ex-commandos to armament and training experts hired by multifarious employers including drug cartels and international corporations.[6] One such example apparently came to light when Colombian officials charged a former Israeli officer, Yair Klien, of arming and training drug traffickers, a charge that Klien denies.[7]

Hired soldiers have a long history but not a highly regarded one. Foreign mercenary soldiers were used by nearly every ancient empire from the Hittites forward, including Persia, China, Greece, and Rome. Xenophon, it will be recalled, was a mercenary leader in the service of a foreign king.[8] However, it was in the warring mini-states of Renaissance Italy that mercenaries probably enjoyed the most prominence. During this period (c. 1420-1600) the condottieri served whoever would pay and did so without stigma. War was a barbaric business. The citizens of rich and flourishing states were not about to waste their time or their lives in pursuit of it.[9]

This attitude was mirrored elsewhere for another 200 years during the rise of nationalism. But, as the nation-state grew to become the dominant form of social organization, so did nationalism and the identification of the state as the locus of loyalty. By the time of American independence the founders could list the King of England's use of "foreign mercenaries" as a specific offense against him. After the French Revolution combined nationalism with universal conscription and spread its ideals throughout Europe and the West, "it was considered correct that every man should fight for his country and dishonorable that a man should serve under another flag." [10] During the period since 1799, the unwritten belief that mercenary service was immoral and improper came to be thought of as a moral law, and the use of mercenaries often caused bitter resentment. Still, under customary international law, mercenaries were treated in the same manner as other combatants and if captured were entitled to treatment as prisoners of war. However, the 1977 protocol to the Geneva Convention of 1949, Article 47, sought to codify disgust for mercenaries. For signatories to this protocol, mercenaries are considered outlaws, placing them in the category of criminals or worse.[11] Historian Anthony Mockler suggests that by the end of the 20th century, this belief is "almost instinctive," pointing out that "it is generally forgotten how comparatively recent and illogical this sentiment is." [12]

For purposes of this discussion, there are three types of mercenaries. The first might be called the "traditional" type, consisting of groups and individuals who have military skills directly applicable to combat or immediate combat support. Where once they might have been canoneers, archers, or siege engineers, now they offer combat training, leadership, or combat support skills: artillerymen, combat aviators (including helicopter pilots), military engineers, and the like. They are basic, industrial-age, high-tech forces. Russian ex-military aviators flying fighters for the Congo government are an example.[13] They are almost always trained veterans of the armed forces of major powers and seldom basic infantry soldiers. They may conduct training for basic soldiers (provided by the client) and even lead them in combat. These are often ad hoc groups of individuals who respond to ads placed by the sponsoring state, but in recent years higher forms of organization have appeared, as corporations or their subsidiaries, for example. Consider the recent deal by Russian-based Sukhoi Design Bureau to provide Su-27s to Ethiopia for its war with Eritrea. Although Ethiopia was anxious for modern aircraft, the country lacked trained aviators. As part of the sales agreement,

Sukhoi reportedly included former Russian military pilots, mechanics, and ground personnel on contract, in effect delivering a small, but complete, air force.

The second type is a late 20th-century phenomenon--fairly large commercial companies that provide the kind of services expected of a general staff in one of the more developed national armies: high-quality tactical, operational, and strategic advice for the structure, training, equipping, and employment of armed forces. These are composed almost exclusively of retired senior officers and noncommissioned officers of major armed forces, usually including at least a few former generals. With an array of subcontractors, they are capable of providing most of the services required to field an armed force: advisory strategic planning, force development, research and threat analysis; general staff training, including air and naval operations; training in multi-service, combined operations including intelligence and electronic warfare; and combined arms training for tactical units. These organizations specialize in helping industrial-age armies transit into the 21st century through the incorporation of techniques for conducting infotech warfare. Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MPRI) of Alexandria, Virginia, is an example of this type. We shall return to MPRI shortly.

The third type provides highly specialized services with a military application, but these groups are not in themselves notably military or paramilitary in organization or methods. Although members of such an organization may or may not have military experience or training, they have skills and abilities with military as well as civilian use. These are usually much smaller than the first two types, performing such functions as personal protection, signal intercept, computer "cracking," secure communications, or technical surveillance. An example of these is AirScan, a company based in Titusville, Florida. According to the company's website, AirScan "provides day/night operational superiority," performing "airborne surveillance and security operations and specialized consulting services for a variety of customers across a number of mission areas. Many of our clients require discretion and their privacy is respected." Like most such firms, the company serves a wide variety of clients, including the US Department of the Interior and multinational oil companies.[14] In Angola, AirScan uses light twin-engine aircraft (Cessna 337s), equipped with low-light television, infrared, and other sensors, to provide aerial surveillance on the periphery of oil fields.

These latter two types of activity did not emerge overnight. Although civilian contractors have been providing noncombat services to the military since at least the Middle Ages, they seldom undertook basic military functions. That was the province of the traditional mercenary fighter and trainer. But since the mid-1970s, some purely military activities have become increasingly privatized. Since major powers have often been politically unwilling (the United States), unable (Great Britain), or unwelcome (Russia) to provide the needed military services, this gap was filled by defense contractors, usually either American or British. The first large-scale project came in 1975, when the Vinnell Corporation of California received a multimillion-dollar, long-term contract to create and operate an entire training establishment for the Saudi Arabian National Guard. This differed from earlier arrangements since Vinnell was not merely building or even operating facilities such as drydocks or telephone systems, but actually undertaking to provide military equipment and large-scale combat training. Still in operation outside Riyadh, the Saudi capital, the endeavor now encompasses all the skills and equipment required to train and field fully equipped light armored brigades complete with artillery support and anti-aircraft weapons.[15] Reportedly, Vinnell advisors provided "tactical support" and advice to the Saudi military when it retook the Grand Mosque at Mecca after antigovernment forces occupied it in 1979. At least two Vinnell-trained Saudi armored brigades fought in the Gulf War of 1991.

Down in the Trenches: Executive Outcomes

Executive Outcomes is an example of the first type of mercenary group, providing expert services in connection with combat and combat support. It represents the expanded model of the military contractor. It was founded in 1989 by veterans of the South African Defense Forces and registered in Britain in 1993.[16] The organization promised:

- To provide a highly professional and confidential military advisory service to legitimate governments.
- To provide sound military and strategic advice.
- To provide the most professional military training packages currently available to armed forces, covering aspects related to sea, air, and land warfare.
- To provide advice to armed forces on weapon and weapon platform selection.
- To provide a total apolitical service based on confidentiality, professionalism, and dedication.

Executive Outcomes came to prominence in March 1993 when rebels from UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) captured an oil storage area. The Forças Armadas Angolanas (FAA) was unable to eject the rebels. Executive Outcomes assembled a group of 50 former officers and noncommissioned officers who organized and led an attack by 600 FAA troops against the storage area compound, quickly recapturing it. Casualties were minimal (three South Africans were wounded), and the drilling equipment suffered only superficial damage. Executive Outcomes then took on the responsibility of guarding the area. When UNITA charged that the oil company was using white mercenaries, the oil company replied that they were a mixed-race force of security guards.[17]

This success was followed in September 1993 with a contract to protect a diamond mine in Canfunfo in Lunda Norte, Angola. Estimates put the contract at \$40 million (about half for soldiers and half for equipment and supplies). The men were provided as "military trainers" but were allowed to carry out preemptive strikes against UNITA if they felt they or the mine was threatened. At one point, UNITA troops overran the mine, leaving 36 dead, most of them from the security firm. Events after that are unclear, but Executive Outcomes apparently regained possession of the mine and, in 1998, began training soldiers of the Angolan army.

In March 1995 an Executive Outcomes team went to the aid of the rebel-beleaguered Kono diamond mines in Sierra Leone. The force was assembled and in action by April, taking just 11 days to drive the rebels away from the capital and, using helicopter gunships, chase them out of the diamonds fields. The most interesting aspect of all this, however, is perhaps the method of payment. The chronically impoverished government of Sierra Leone apparently paid for these services by giving a company called Branch Energy the concession to operate the Koidu diamond field (the Sierra Leone government retains a 60-percent ownership). Reputedly, Branch Energy is owned by Strategic Resources Group, a British company based in the Bahamas, that in turn owned Executive Outcomes. It seems that the firm was able to barter its services for large shares of a client nation's natural resources and commodities. According to a British government evaluation reported by Inter Press Service: "On present showing, Executive Outcomes will become ever richer and more potent, capable of exercising real power, even to the extent of keeping military regimes in being. If it continues to expand at the present rate, its influence in sub-Saharan Africa could become crucial." [18]

Executive Outcomes claimed to supply men and expertise to seven countries in Africa, among them Kenya, Angola, and Uganda. In 1998, the company claimed to be discussing deals with customers in Malawi, Mozambique, Sudan, and even a client in Southeast Asia.[19] However, the heyday of Executive Outcomes seemed to come an abrupt halt on 1 January 1999 when the company went "out of business," apparently in response to new South African laws banning mercenary activity by its nationals. A triumph of high-minded legislation? Perhaps, but oddly enough, Executive Outcomes' Pretoria offices remain staffed, and its employees in Sierra Leone have begun working for a new firm called Lifeguard. In Angola, former Executive Outcomes employees are reportedly working for both the national government and the UNITA rebels that oppose it.[20]

Up in the Executive Suite: Military Professional Resources Inc.

MPRI is a prime example of the second type of "mercenary" activity, one providing general-staff-like services. It is less interested in the heat of combat than in strategic planning and the disciplined routine of higher military headquarters. Formed in 1986, the firm has over 350 full-time "core" employees and an estimated 2000 more available for contracts that can run from a few days to several months. Advertising itself as having the "the world's greatest corporate military expertise," the firm consists of former military professionals (largely retired senior officers and noncommissioned officers) who provide large-scale military planning and training. The Alexandria, Virginia, firm reportedly posted a volume of business in excess of \$24 million for 1996.[21]

As described by MPRI, "the company's business focus is on military matters, to include training, equipping, force design and management, professional development, concepts and doctrine, organizational and operational requirements, simulation and wargaming operations, humanitarian assistance, quick reaction military contractual support, and democracy transition assistance programs for the military forces of emerging republics." Company officials say Military Professional Resources Inc. is distinguished by its professionalism, its adherence to US policy, and its refusal to fight a war for its customers.[22]

MPRI carried out a number of interesting smaller tasks including a US contract in 1994 to send 45 border monitors to

Serbia to ensure that arms were not being smuggled to Bosnian Serb fighters in Bosnia. But the company first gained its reputation with a major project in Croatia, beginning in September 1994.[23] With the explicit consent of the US State and Defense Departments, the firm undertook to modernize and retrain the command structure of the Croatian national army, including the general staff. In the summer of 1995, with such assistance, the formerly inept Croatian army mounted Operation Storm, a successful summer offensive into the region of the Krajina. In less than a month they ejected Serb-supported forces and 150,000 Croatian Serb civilians with remarkably little bloodshed. Control of the region, long held by the Serbs, returned to Zagreb. According to observers, the Croat forces used typical American combined-arms tactics, including integrated air, artillery, and infantry movements, as well as maneuver warfare targeted against Serbian command, control, and communication systems. French and British officials accused MPRI of helping to plan the Croatian invasion, an allegation denied by the company.[24] Correctly or not, MPRI received credit for a major success.

This was quickly followed by a renewable 13-month contract with Bosnia, valued by Bosnia's UN ambassador, Muhamed Sacirbey, at "tens of millions of dollars." The contract was financed by a number of Islamic countries, according to newspaper reports. The Bosnian army received more than \$100 million in surplus military equipment from the US government under a so-called "Equip and Train Program." MPRI contractors helped with everything from planning long-term defense strategy to conducting war games and demonstrating the new tanks and artillery.[25]

Potential for Growth, Potential for Problems

The successful track record of companies like Executive Outcomes, MPRI, and others (notably Sandline International) makes them a realistic option for governments that see privatized military training as an effective way to stretch their military budget. For the risk-averse, like the US military, employing such private contractors can help to overcome the political reluctance to become involved in situations where risks are high and there is little domestic constituency for the involvement of US troops. An example is the US decision in 1998 to contract with DynCorp, a Virginia-based firm, for verification monitors in Kosovo while other countries involved provided officers from their national militaries.[26]

There is, however, a basic question of accountability when private corporations encroach on what has traditionally been the responsibility of governments, the United Nations, or regional alliances like NATO. Governments are accountable to their people and their legislatures. Private corporations, on the other hand, have little accountability to the public and are to some degree shielded from the scrutiny of government. Herbert Howe, a Georgetown University professor who specializes in the privatization of armed conflict in Africa, adds, "I think the major worry that everyone has about this sort of thing is, will these forces become a force unto themselves, kind of rogue elephants?"[27]

James L. Woods, a Washington defense consultant, agrees: "If the international community cannot get its act together and help these countries keep themselves together and protect commerce and protect the citizenry, you're going to see more and more" examples of private contractors doing the job. Woods, a partner in the consulting firm of Cohen & Woods International, added, "It's the same in the American cities where the forces of law and order are losing control in certain neighborhoods. A lot of people are building walls around their compounds and hiring armed guards to protect them." Over time, Woods suggested, these enterprises could become stronger than some of the sovereign states they are hired to protect.[28]

If this sounds like hyperbole, consider the struggle of the international community to cope with these developments. On one hand, there is widespread belief that the mercenary phenomenon is a potentially dangerous and destabilizing development, but it is also an accommodation to the reality that states are no longer willing (or in some cases able) to meet the financial and political costs of maintaining their monopoly on the use of deadly force. The United Nations has continued to criticize African governments in particular for hiring mercenaries to provide security in return for a stake in the host nation's rich mineral resources. However, the only realistic choices for such governments may be to obtain outside military assistance in the form of mercenaries or forfeit power.

In his report on use of mercenaries, UN Special Rapporteur Enrique Ballesteros characterized them as politically disconnected from the societies into which they are introduced by governments. This, Ballesteros claimed, made them instruments for oppression, used to violate human rights and to impede the exercise of the right of people to self-

determination. He asserted that mercenary initiatives by private companies registered as security firms in a third country were a threat to national sovereignty.[29] In so doing, he repeated nearly verbatim the language of a 1992 General Assembly resolution directed against the use of mercenaries.[30]

The report also took note of the economic influence that was sometimes gained by the parent corporation, owners of the mercenary firm. "Once a greater degree of security has been attained, the firm apparently begins to exploit the concessions it has received by setting up a number of associates and affiliates which engage in such varying activities as air transport, road building, and import and export, thereby acquiring a significant, if not hegemonic, presence in the economic life of the country in which it is operating." [31]

Despite the foregoing position, there has been little success in creating international legislation that will prevent the existence of mercenaries, and it may be impossible to do so. Jeffery Herbst has pointed out some of the problems in taking action against such firms, including their low asset base and lack of permanent employees. As Herbst states, there "is no compelling reason" for such firms to be headquartered in any particular place.[32]

It is instructive to note that an International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing, and Training of Mercenaries, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989, has yet to be fully ratified. None of signatories, which include Austria, Barbados, Cyprus, Georgia, the Maldives, the Seychelles, Suriname, Togo, and Ukraine, are significant suppliers of mercenaries or home to large international security firms. But two of the signatories, Angola and Zaire, overtly use mercenaries in their internal struggles despite their own laws forbidding mercenary activity.[33]

This brings us to an obvious question. If other nations, individually or collectively, are not going to contribute to multilateral peacekeeping or peacemaking forces, shouldn't a state have the right to hire a force able to keep order? It seems distinctly odd, both legally and morally, to argue that a state is somehow required to depend on whatever conscripts it can muster and train them as best it can, rather than obtain expert assistance from outside. In cases such as Liberia (1997), one can plausibly argue that a professional hired force would have been far preferable to the depredations and general incompetence of the African multinational peacekeeping force.

Despite their apparent ineffectiveness, the legal initiatives to proscribe mercenary activity are not unimportant. Should one of these initiatives succeed, much intrastate security activity will become illegal. Those individuals and groups who persist might easily find themselves in the same status as bandits, pirates, and outlaws, literally eligible to be captured or killed with impunity by anyone who has an interest in doing so. Their position would be even worse than that of terrorists, since terrorists can and often do claim at least some shred of political sanction for their actions.

Part of the problem in obtaining anti-mercenary laws and treaties is that no major power has taken a serious interest in promoting them. If corporate mercenaries gain anything like the degree of power and influence predicted by some analysts, the great powers would certainly find it in their interest to implement legal constraints. Another part of the problem is the fact that not all security firms are alike. Some, like MPRI, are actually de facto arms of their national governments. Others may not be. The realities of the situation are brought home by the experience of the United Nations. Theoretically, the security forces of any nation hosting UN personnel and installations are responsible for safeguarding them. But this becomes problematic when there are no effective security forces or when such security forces as do exist are part of the problem. The United Nations itself has made use of hired soldiers in the field, notably in Somalia where armed clansmen were hired as guards. Reportedly, one so-called mercenary firm assisted in providing security for UN offices in Kinshasa during the unrest of 1997.

The military incapacity of the UN itself has also become an issue. Secretary General Kofi Annan has stated flatly that the UN lacked the military capacity and the political support to intervene in the slaughter of 500,000 Hutus during the Rwandan genocide of 1993-94: "If I had one reinforced brigade, that is, fire power and men--well trained and well equipped--I could have saved hundreds of thousands of lives." [34] When national governments are not interested in sending their armies to intervene in local conflicts, the UN may be forced to resort to some sort of security firm. In 1995, when the United Nations was trying to separate the armed elements from the refugees on the Rwandan-Zairian border, no governments wanted to offer troops. "One of the options examined was the possibility of bringing in other elements--not necessarily troops from governments--who might be able to provide security, assist the aid workers in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and protect them as they did their work." [35] This is

not a new idea. Proposals to hire Nepalese Gurkhas or similar groups to man the UN permanent professional rapid reaction forces have been around for years.[36]

In March 1998, employees of Sandline International, depicted by the press as "a British mercenary force," helped restore the elected president of Sierra Leone to power a year after he was ousted by a military coup. Officers of the Sierra Leone army had seized control of the country in May 1997 and began a brutal series of murders aimed at any possible political opposition. Despite the coup and the public killings, Washington and other governments were unable to mount effective action. In October, when all diplomatic attempts to oust the mutinous generals had failed, the UN Security Council imposed an ineffective arms embargo. Finally, Sandline was asked to help. Although publicly depicted as a private security firm guarding "mining and construction interests," Sandline told the press that it was asked by the British High Commissioner in Sierra Leone to help train and equip a local force capable of removing the generals. The American State Department was also apparently kept fully informed, and the US government lent at least its tacit support. Reportedly, the firm received \$10 million for its part in the action, including the cost of weapons and ammunition.[37]

This incident illustrates two points about the use of mercenary forces in the 21st century. The first is that, for the most part, they are not independent operators. Although these firms are organized as profit-making corporations, contrary to the fears of numerous commentators they are under the control of the governments of the major powers and, as the Sandline and MPRI cases show, operate only with their consent. This is especially true of the larger firms such as MPRI, which has very close ties with the US departments of Defense and State. Lurking at the bottom of much of the current animus toward hired fighters is an argument founded in Western, especially Anglo-American, ideas about democracy. A military force that is drawn from the people of a given nation and dedicated only to the defense of that nation is seen as an expression of the consent of the governed. They legitimize their government by their desire to defend it. Recalling the use of mercenaries, especially in Africa, to suppress genuine popular discontent and prop up tottering regimes, opponents see mercenaries as an anti-democratic force. There is some validity to this view, but a far greater number of corrupt and illegitimate regimes throughout history have been sustained by native soldiers. The example of Haiti comes to mind.

Future Focus

From the point of view of the nation-state, military corporations are dangerous for a far more fundamental reason: they generate military power that does not reside in the nation-state itself. The real issue is not the first two types of mercenary, the small groups with traditional military skills and the larger advisory corporations. With regard to the first type they can probably be controlled (but not eliminated) by the sort of constraints the United Nations has been struggling to enact.

With regard to the second type--the advisory corporation--it is not significantly problematic in its current form. None to date is known to have worked against the interests of its parent nation. The reality is that they are a de facto extension of the foreign policy of their state of origin. Sandline, for example, apparently "provided the State Department with information on the events in Sierra Leone"--political-military intelligence, in other words--when US sources dried up after the 1997 coup.[38] They offer a low-risk, low-cost, low-visibility way to exert military influence in a time of diminished budgets and shrinking armed forces. In the words of Sandline founder Timothy Spicer,

It's not so much that we can do things better than sovereign governments--though sometimes in Africa a heavy machinegun can be as effective as 10 tanks elsewhere--it's that we can do it without any of the spin-offs that make military intervention unpalatable to governments; casualties among [private military companies] do not have the same emotive impact as those from national forces. And we can act quickly. Too often, politicians won't make a decision to intervene either at all, or until it is too late.[39]

The real concern for 21st-century conflict may lie with the third type of mercenary, the technical specialist. If, as many believe, much future conflict will be economic and infrastructural "cyber" warfare conducted through information systems or via other high-technology means, these individuals or organizations may be much more dangerous. But because they provide military or paramilitary applications of civilian technologies with many legitimate and useful purposes, they will be very difficult to regulate or otherwise control. Nor are they as marginal to warfighting as they

may sound. Even the more old-fashioned mercenary organizations such as Executive Outcomes have succeeded less because of their machine-guns than because they are able to employ advanced methods such as radio-intercept and night-vision devices and to use psychological operations techniques. Also, the nature of the skills involved is such that the providers are not necessarily dependent on former military experiences for their own training. Many of these firms will be knowledge-oriented and have low capital bases. This means low barriers for entry into the industry, especially at the bottom. It is also an area where it is difficult to define an activity as "mercenary," since the difference between peace and war can be largely a matter of intention. Computer system professionals have many means to enter and survey information systems for security flaws or lapses. Anyone can hire such firms, and whether their discoveries are to be used for good or ill is invisible to the outside observer until too late.[40] Finally, these corporations may prosper because they provide services not otherwise available. Even the US Army has concluded that in the future it will require contract personnel, even in the close fight area, to keep its most modern systems functioning. This applies especially to information-related systems.[41] Information warfare, in fact, may well become dominated by mercenaries.

In a violent and often unfair world, it is certain that the demand for mercenaries will not go away soon. If the great powers, collectively or individually, are not willing to take up the role of global police in unlikely and unrewarding places, it is equally certain that others will fill that vacuum for good or for ill. In the end, the issue of mercenaries comes down to a question of deciding what kind of world we want and are willing to pay for, both in blood and money.

NOTES

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