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U.S. Contractor Dies in Iraq Bomb Blast

Incident Is First Fatal Attack Reported Against a Private Employee

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TIKRIT, Iraq, Aug. 5 -- An American civilian defense contractor delivering mail to U.S. troops died today when a remote-controlled bomb exploded under his car in an area U.S. officials say is rife with loyalists of former president Saddam Hussein.

Today's incident was the first reported fatal attack on private defense contractors in Iraq, who are heading overseas in increasing numbers to support the military and take over jobs once exclusively held by soldiers.

The contractor, an employee of Houston-based Kellogg Brown and Root, was headed to the Tikrit North airfield at around 11:30 a.m. when an explosive detonated under his car, said Lt. Col. David Poirier of the 720th Military Police Battalion. Two soldiers who were part of the military police convoy escorting the contractor were injured, Poirier said.

Kellogg Brown and Root is a subsidiary of Halliburton Co., the Texas energy firm formerly run by Vice President Cheney. The company received a non-competitive contract from the Army Corps of Engineers in March to fight oil well fires in Iraq, rehabilitate the country's oil infrastructure and provide other support services to the U.S. military.

In a statement today, company officials said the employee's truck hit an antitank mine while on a routine mail run from Baghdad to northern Iraq. Army medics responded at the scene, and the employee was taken to a nearby military hospital but was pronounced dead on arrival, company officials said.

Company officials withheld the name of the contractor and details of the project he was assigned to for security reasons and said an investigation was pending. The employee was part of a team that supported an Army project called Material Command Logcap III.

The death took place in an area north of Tikrit that is part of what is known as the Sunni triangle, a restive area where U.S. officials say guerrilla fighters and former members of Hussein's Baath Party have plotted attacks against U.S. forces.

Civilian contractors give the military training and logistics support and have been a large part of the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The U.S. civil occupation authority in Iraq has hired hundreds of civilian contractors for such projects as building a wireless telephone network and is currently looking for a firm to make military dog tags in Arabic.

In January in Kuwait, one American civilian contractor was killed and another was injured when their car was sprayed by gunfire from an AK-47 assault rifle at a busy intersection near Camp Doha, a U.S. base.

In Cairo today, the Arab League decided not to recognize Iraq's new Governing Council as the country's representative to the 22-member bloc. Diplomats at the league said they would allow Iraq's seat to be

claimed only by an elected government.

"The council is a start, but it should pave the way for a legitimate government that can be recognized," Amr Moussa, secretary general of the Arab League, told reporters after a meeting of Arab foreign ministers.

The organization's spokesman, Hisham Youssef, said the group was "ready and willing" to deal with the council "just as we deal with any political force in Iraq." But, he said, formal recognition, which the council has not requested, was out of the question.

"How do you recognize a council?" he said. "How can we recognize a country under occupation?"

The decision infuriated several members of the council, who accused the Arab League of being overly supportive of Hussein's former government. "Their decision is no surprise," said council member Abdul Karim Muhammadawi. "The Arab League was too close to the old regime."

The council's president for this month, Ibrahim Jafari, insisted the council was "fully representative of the Iraqi people."

"We need reconciliation and dialogue" with the league, he said in an interview.

In Tikrit, meanwhile, military officials with the 4th Infantry Division said they detained nine former members of Saddam's Fedayeen paramilitary group and four other "targets," but provided no further information.

Chandrasekaran reported from Baghdad.

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