

COMMENT

## Contractors are Dying

WAR OPENS LUCRATIVE BUSINESS for military contractors. They reaped enormous bonanza in America's Iraq war. And they are in increasing numbers in Afghanistan because America and its allies have been outsourcing even regular military job to civilian contractors. In truth many of India's top business houses including Tatas owe their bigness to military contracts during the Second World War. These people always need war because their survival depends on war economy. But they also die in war as they are dying in large numbers these days in the Afghan theatre.

In the war in Afghanistan, US and NATO forces have increasingly shifted traditional military jobs, from mess hall cooks to base guards and convoy drivers to the private sector. Private contractors are performing the duties of personal bodyguards for many US generals and diplomats. For the first time during the war, a larger number of civilian contractors working for American companies than US soldiers, died in Afghanistan during 2011. At least 430 employees of American contractors were reportedly killed in Afghanistan in 2011. Around 386 were working for the Defence Department, 43 for the US Agency for International Development and one for the State Department. Whereas in 2011, 418 US soldiers died in combat in Afghanistan. For the past several years, the trend has been growing in Afghanistan, and it parallels a similar trend in Iraq. The American employers in Afghanistan frequently do not publicly report the deaths of their employees, as they are under no obligation. As of the first quarter of 2012, there were about 114,000 employees of defence contractors in Afghanistan, compared with about 90000 US soldiers. Amongst the employees of civilian contractors, 22% were US citizens, 47% Afghans and 31% from other countries.

As civilians casualties in Afghan conflict are on the rise, contractors too are dying threatening American civil supply line in Afghanistan. The overall civilian deaths in crossfire are really bone-chilling because spill-over effect in adjoining Pakistan's border region cannot be anything but nightmarish. Then military contractors or defence suppliers cannot keep their logistics business going without using Pakistani soil.

In its 2011 annual report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict in Afghanistan, released last month, UNAMA—United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan—said that over the past five years, the number of Afghan civilians killed in the armed conflict has increased each year, with a total of 11864 civilian lives claimed by the conflict since 2007. And many of them are military contractors and sub-contractors and their poor local employees who are being lured to earn quick fortunes in 'danger zones'. □□□