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America's Shame: The U.S. Government's Human Trafficking Dilemma

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For Vinnie Tuivaga, the offer was the answer to a prayer: A job in a luxury hotel in Dubai -- the so-called Las Vegas of the Persian Gulf -- making five times what she was earning as a hair stylist in her native Fiji.

She jumped at the chance, even if it meant paying an upfront commission to the recruiter.

You probably know how this story is going to end. There was no high-paying job, luxury location or easy work.

Tuivaga and other Fijians ended up in Iraq where they lived in shipping containers and existed in what amounted to indentured servitude.

Journalist Sarah Stillman told Tuivaga's story and that of tens of thousands of other foreign workers in acute detail almost a year ago in her *New Yorker* piece, "[The Invisible Army](#)." In some cases, Stillman found more severe abuses and more squalid living conditions than what Tuivaga and her fellow Fijians experienced.

But like Tuivaga, thousands of foreign nationals in the U.S. government's invisible army ended up in Iraq and Afghanistan war zones because they fell victim to human traffickers.

Let that sink in.

This human trafficking pipeline wasn't benefiting some shadowy war lord or oppressive regime. No, these are workers who were feeding, cleaning up after and providing logistical support for U.S. troops -- the standard bearers of the free and democratic world.

In its final report to Congress last year, the Commission on Wartime Contracting said it had uncovered evidence of [human trafficking](#) in Iraq and Afghanistan by labor brokers and subcontractors. Commissioner Dov Zakheim later told a Senate panel that the Commission had only scratched the surface of the problem. He called it the "tip of the iceberg."

In essence, despite a 2002 presidential directive that set a "zero tolerance" on human trafficking, modern-day slavers have been operating with impunity under the aegis of the U.S. government.

Nick Schwellenbach, who until last month was the director of investigations at the Project On Government Oversight (POGO), and author David Isenberg also wrote about the [conditions some of these foreign workers](#)

[endured in Iraq](#).

Nick and David uncovered documents that showed how one U.S. contractor -- in this case KBR -- was well aware that one of its subcontractors, Najlaa International Catering Services, was allegedly involved in trafficking abuses. From their article:

The freshly unearthed documents show that for several months, KBR employees expressed exasperation at Najlaa's apparent abuse of the laborers and said the subcontractor was embarrassing KBR in front of its main client in Iraq: the U.S. military. But despite its own employees' strongly worded communications to Najlaa, to this day, KBR continues to award subcontracts to the company.

Nick later testified before a House subcommittee, [outlining reforms](#) that Congress should pass to hold contractors and subcontractors accountable.

Well, it appears that some of the attention focused on human trafficking (including the movie *The Whistleblower*, the story of [U.N. peacekeeper Kathryn Bolkovac](#), who blew the whistle on sex trafficking in post-war Bosnia) in the last year may finally be paying off.

Some members of Congress have introduced measures aimed at preventing human trafficking by government contractors and subcontractors.

The bipartisan proposals (End Trafficking in Government Contracting Act of 2012, S. 2234 and H.R. 42), which include some of the reforms that POGO has recommended, are sponsored by Rep. James Lankford (R-Okla.) and Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.). Rep. Lankford is likely to offer his bill as an amendment to the defense spending package being considered by the House this month. Both bills would require contractors to create plans to prevent trafficking and requires companies to closely monitor and report the activities of their subcontractors.

The measures also call for penalties, including suspending or debarring or criminally prosecuting violators.

Sen. Blumenthal said current law is insufficient and ineffective and fails to prevent abuses.

"Modern-day slavery by government contractors -- unknowingly funded by American taxpayers -- is unconscionable and intolerable," Blumenthal said.

And, really, all of us should feel pangs of guilt for the human rights violations perpetrated by those profiting in the name of the American people. POGO launched a campaign this week, urging people to tell their Members of Congress to support the anti-trafficking legislation [[Click here to join the campaign](#)].

It comes too late to help those workers who were abused during our decade of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But our presence in Iraq, Afghanistan and in military bases all over the world continues. And the invisible army we rely upon to keep those bases running needs this protection as much as ever.

Joe Newman is the director of communications for the Project On Government Oversight. A version of this article was cross-posted on [POGO's blog](#).

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