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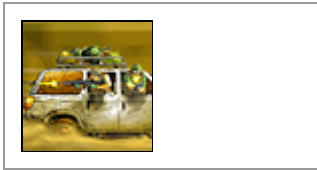
San Francisco Chronicle

Mercenaries 'Shadow Company' Documentary examines role of private contractors in global conflicts

Reyhan Harmanci
Thursday, March 8, 2007

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The existence of private companies that have been contracted out for quasi-military functions in Iraq was not widely reported until 2004, when a brutal killing at the hands of a mob of insurgents in Fallujah made people wonder who those guys were and what were they doing in Iraq. First-time filmmaker Nick Bicanic, along with Jason Bourque, wondered the same things and made a documentary, "**Shadow Company**," to provide a look at the mercenary work being done in Iraq and other combat zones around the world.



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"What we found was this (private contractors who work for the military) is not a novelty," says the British-born Bicanic, who lives in Los Angeles. "Privatization has been going on for years, for the better part of this and the previous century.

"What's different is the amount in Iraq."

Bicanic became fascinated by the field of private military companies, or PMCs, like the Blackwater **company**, when he heard from a Cambridge University pal, James Ashcroft, who

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took a job in Iraq. Bicanic eventually enlisted Ashcroft to tape his experience in Iraq and provide commentary in the film.

"James introduced to me all these concepts in the privatization of warfare," he says. "His e-mails were full of all this odd information about life in war zones, stuff you don't necessarily read or hear on TV."

Bicanic says that one of the most important things in making this documentary was not promoting one political agenda or another. As he went about documenting who the players were in the PMC world, he found that it took a lot of time and convincing to make the contractors talk. It was only after they believed that he wouldn't demonize their work that they let him in.

The basic situation is that many global conflicts -- from the diamond mines of Sierra Leone, to the situation in Darfur, to Iraq -- require the services of PMCs. Their numbers in Iraq may be unprecedented (although getting an accurate count is nearly impossible, there are so many layers of contractors and subcontractors), but PMCs and mercenary soldiers show up in a variety of forms across the world. Bicanic says he aimed to show how they work without passing judgment on their existence.

"There are a lot of jobs that can be performed more cheaply and efficiently by private companies than by the government. If you removed the private sector, the reconstruction efforts in Iraq would implode," he says. "But without the government sending 'our boys and girls,' the checks and balances are gone."

Screening and panel discussion 7 p.m. Fri. Through March 15. \$ 8.50. Roxie Cinema, 3117 16th St., S.F. (415)863-1087. www.roxie.com.

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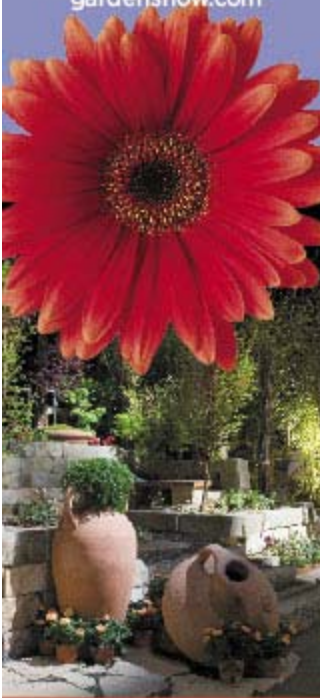
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