



A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE INVISIBLE ARMY

For foreign workers on U.S. bases in Iraq and Afghanistan, war can be hell.

BY SARAH STILLMAN

It was lunchtime in Suva, Fiji, a slow day at the end of the tourist season in September of 2007, when four men appeared in the doorway of the Rever Beauty Salon, where Vinnie Tuivaga worked as a hair stylist. The men wore polished shoes and bright Hawaiian shirts, and they told Vinnie about a job that sounded, she recalls, like “the fruits of my submission to the Lord all these years.” How would she like to make five times her current salary at a luxury hotel in Dubai, a place known as the City of Gold? How would she like to have wealthy Arab customers, women who

paid ridiculous fees for trendy cut-and-color jobs?

“I’ll talk it over with my husband,” she replied, coolly, but her pulse was racing. Vinnie, who was forty-five, had never worked abroad, but she often dreamed of it while hearing missionaries’ lectures at her local church. Nearly six feet tall and two hundred and thirty pounds, Vinnie moved with an arthritic gait. But she took care with her appearance. She wore shiny slacks, with a gold pageboy cap on her perfectly coiffed frosted black hair, and carried a bright-red faux-leather purse, stuffed with silver eyeshadow. She

could see herself working in one of the great cosmopolitan capitals. The offer seemed like her big break, the chance to send her teen-age daughter to hospitality college and to pay her youngest son’s fees for secondary school.

Later that week, at a salon around the corner, Lydia Qeraniu, thirty-two, heard a similar offer. A quick-witted woman with a coquettish smile and a figure that prompted Fijian men to call out “*uro, uro!*”—slang for “yummy”—Lydia was thrilled by the prospect of a career in Dubai. So were many other women in beauty shops and beachside hotels across

MAGNUM

More than seventy thousand “third-country nationals” work for the American military in war zones; many report being held in conditions



Fiji. A Korean Air flight to Dubai would be leaving from Nadi International Airport in a few days. The women just had to deliver their résumés, hand over their passports, submit to medical tests, and pay a commission of five hundred dollars to a local recruitment firm called Meridian Services Agency.

Soon, more than fifty women were lined up outside Meridian's office to compete for positions that would pay as much as thirty-eight hundred dollars a month—more than ten times Fiji's annual per-capita income. Ten women were chosen, Vinnie and Lydia among them. Vinnie lifted her arms in the air and sang her favorite gospel song: "We're gonna make it, we're gonna make it. With Jesus on our side, things will work out fine." Lydia raced home to tell her husband and explain things to her five-year-old son. "Mommy's going to be O.K.," she recalls telling him. "Dubai, it's a rich country. Only good things can happen."

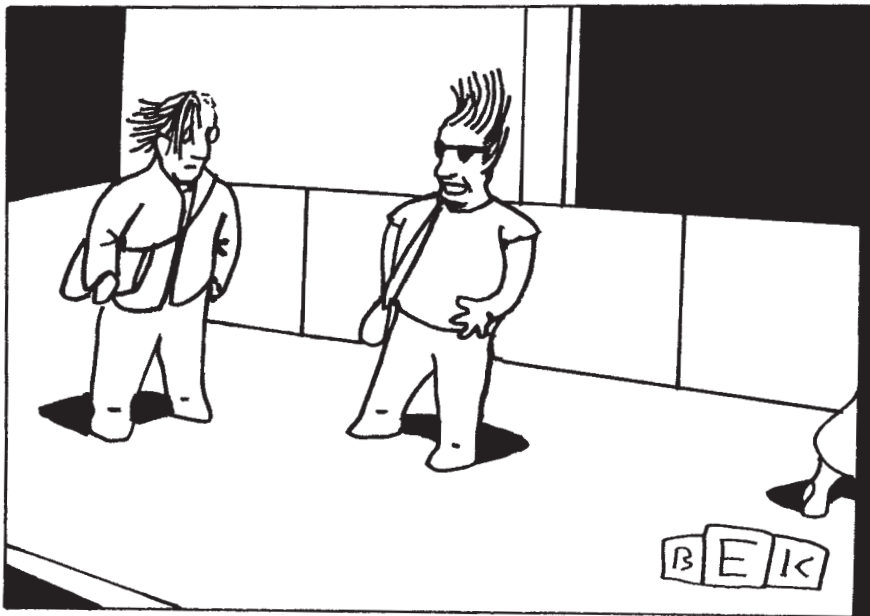
On the morning of October 10, 2007,

the beauticians boarded their flight to the Emirates. They carried duffelbags full of cosmetics, family photographs, Bibles, floral sarongs, and chambas, traditional silky Fijian tops worn with patterned skirts. More than half of the women left husbands and children behind. In the rush to depart, none of them examined the fine print on their travel documents: their visas to the Emirates weren't employment permits but thirty-day travel passes that forbade all work, "paid or unpaid"; their occupations were listed as "Sales Coördinator." And Dubai was just a stopping-off point. They were bound for U.S. military bases in Iraq.

Lydia and Vinnie were unwitting recruits for the Pentagon's invisible army: more than seventy thousand cooks, cleaners, construction workers, fast-food clerks, electricians, and beauticians from the world's poorest countries who service U.S. military logistics contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Filipinos launder soldiers' uniforms, Kenyans truck frozen

steaks and inflatable tents, Bosnians repair electrical grids, and Indians provide iced mocha lattes. The Army and Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES) is behind most of the commercial "tastes of home" that can be found on major U.S. bases, which include jewelry stores, souvenir shops filled with carved camels and Taliban chess sets, beauty salons where soldiers can receive massages and pedicures, and fast-food courts featuring Taco Bell, Subway, Pizza Hut, and Cinnabon. (AAFES's motto: "We go where you go.")

The expansion of private-security contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan is well known. But armed security personnel account for only about sixteen per cent of the over-all contracting force. The vast majority—more than sixty per cent of the total in Iraq—aren't hired guns but hired hands. These workers, primarily from South Asia and Africa, often live in barbed-wire compounds on U.S. bases, eat at meagre chow halls, and host dance parties featuring Nepalese romance bal-



"Great stupid haircut!"

lads and Ugandan church songs. A large number are employed by fly-by-night subcontractors who are financed by the American taxpayer but who often operate outside the law.

The wars' foreign workers are known, in military parlance, as "third-country nationals," or T.C.N.s. Many of them recount having been robbed of wages, injured without compensation, subjected to sexual assault, and held in conditions resembling indentured servitude by their subcontractor bosses. Previously unreleased contractor memos, hundreds of interviews, and government documents I obtained during a yearlong investigation confirm many of these claims and reveal other grounds for concern. Widespread mistreatment even led to a series of food riots in Pentagon subcontractor camps, some involving more than a thousand workers.

Amid the slow withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, T.C.N.s have become an integral part of the Obama Administration's long-term strategy, as a way of replacing American boots on the ground. But top U.S. military officials are seeing the drawbacks to this outsourcing bonanza. Some argue, as retired General Stanley McChrystal did before his ouster from Afghanistan, last summer, that the unregulated rise of the Pentagon's Third World logistics army is undermining

American military objectives. Others worry that mistreatment of foreign workers has become, as the former U.S. Representative Christopher Shays, who co-chairs the bipartisan Commission on Wartime Contracting, describes it, "a human-rights abuse that cannot be tolerated."

The extensive outsourcing of wartime logistics—first put to the test during the Clinton Administration, in Somalia and the Balkans—was designed to reduce costs while allowing military personnel to focus on combat. In practice, though, military privatization has produced convoluted chains of foreign subcontracts that often lead to cost overruns and fraud. The Commission on Wartime Contracting recently warned of the dangers associated with "poorly conceived, poorly structured, poorly conducted, and poorly monitored subcontracting," particularly noting the military's "heavy reliance on foreign subcontractors who may not be accountable to any American governmental authority."

The process of outsourcing begins at major government entities, notably the Pentagon, which awarded its most recent prime logistics contract (worth as much as fifteen billion dollars a year) to three U.S.-based private military behemoths: K.B.R. (the former Halliburton subsidiary), DynCorp International, and Fluor. These

"prime vendors" then shop out the bulk of their contracts to hundreds of global subcontractors, many based in Middle Eastern countries that are on the U.S. State Department's human-trafficking non-compliance list. Finally, these firms call upon thousands of Third World "manpower agencies"—small recruiting operations like Meridian Services.

A common recruiting story involves a tempting ad for Middle East "Salad Men" torn out of a newspaper, or an on-line job posting that promises "openings for cooks/chefs/master chefs for one of the best . . . middle east jobs." Given the desperate circumstances of many applicants, few questions are asked, and some subcontractors sneak workers to U.S. bases without security clearances, seeking to bypass basic wage and welfare regulations. "No one plays straight here," a foreign concession manager with six years of experience in Iraq told me. He introduced me to three young Nepali and Bangladeshi workers in a nearby Popeye's and Cinnabon, each of whom had paid a smuggler between three hundred and four hundred dollars to bring them onto the base with a fake letter of authorization. That's in addition to the money—an average of three thousand dollars—they had paid a recruiter in their home country to get the job.

Such sums are hardly unusual. A typical manpower agency charges applicants between two thousand and four thousand dollars, a small fortune in the countries where subcontractors recruit. To raise the money, workers may pawn heirlooms, sell their wedding rings or land or livestock, and take out high-interest loans. U.S. military guidelines prohibit such "excessive" fees. But, in hundreds of interviews with T.C.N.s, I seldom met a worker who had paid less than a thousand dollars for his or her job, and I never learned of a case in which anyone was penalized for charging these fees.

It's equally uncommon to meet a worker who receives the salary he or she was promised. A twenty-five-year-old Taco Bell employee on a major U.S. base in Iraq told me that he had paid a recruiting agency in Nepal four thousand dollars. "You'll make the money back so quick in Iraq!" he was assured. When he arrived in Baghdad, in May, 2009, he was housed in a shipping container behind the U.S. Embassy, in the Green Zone,

where he slept on soiled mattresses with twenty-five other migrants from Nepal, India, and Bangladesh. Many learned that they were to earn as little as two hundred and seventy-five dollars a month as cooks and servers for U.S. soldiers—a fraction of what they'd been promised, and a tiny sliver of what U.S. taxpayers are billed for their labor.

So he paid another agent three hundred dollars to drive him in a taxi to a U.S. base in northern Iraq. There, an Indian smuggler charged an additional three hundred dollars to help him get a five-hundred-dollar-a-month job making burritos. "I am safe now," he said, tearfully, from the food-delivery window. "That is past, yeah? The Army is my father and my mother."

For those familiar with the service economies of the Gulf states, this labor pipeline is simply the latest extension of a transnational system that for decades has supplied Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates with low-wage workers. It's just that these employees face mortar fire, rocket attacks, improvised explosive devices, and other risks of war—and that they are working, albeit through intermediaries, for the United States government.

Vinnie, Lydia, and the other Fijian beauticians landed in Dubai just before dawn in October, 2007. At the airport, they say, they were met by someone associated with Kulak Construction Company, a Turkish firm with millions of dollars in Pentagon subcontracts to do everything from building bowling alleys for troops to maintaining facilities on bases. The women were driven to a private hospital in the heart of the city. "It was very quiet there, because it was Ramadan," Vinnie recalls. In a small examination room, nurses gave them a series of blood tests and vaccinations. Vinnie asked what all the poking and prodding was for. "You'll need these for Iraq," one of the nurses explained.

"Oh, we went crazy when we heard that," the youngest of the Fijian women, a petite twenty-two-year-old former resort hostess named Melanie Gonebale, told me later. We spoke in her flimsy living quarters on Forward Operating Base Sykes, near Tal Afar, in northern Iraq. A Kevlar helmet and bulletproof vest sat at the foot of her bed. "We'd watched

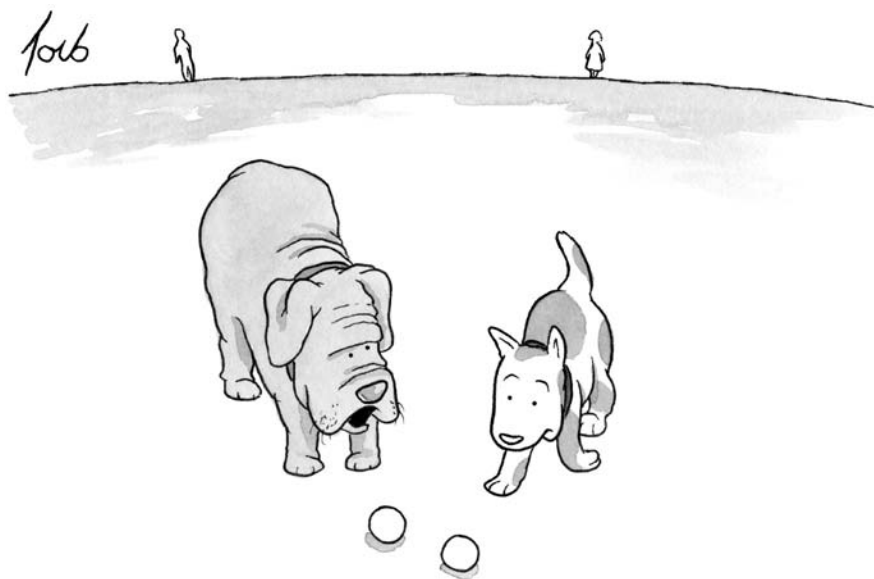
on TV every day about Iraq—the bombs, people dying." That night, the women contemplated running away. But a number of them had taken out loans to cover their recruiting fees, and Meridian had reportedly threatened some with more than a thousand dollars in early-termination fines if they left.

A couple of nights later, a few of the women slipped out to a pay phone to call their families. "You take a big breath, honey," Vinnie told her husband, holding back tears. "I'm not working here in Dubai. A bus is going to take us to the airport, and we're going to go straight to Iraq." After Kie Puafomau, another of the Fijians, reached her husband, he went to the Fijian police, the Ministry of Labor, and the national press. The *Fiji Times* ran a story exposing Meridian Services Agency's recruiting fraud. But, even as the police pledged to investigate, they could do little to help the beauticians some nine thousand miles away.

The next morning, Vinnie, Lydia, and the other women flew to Iraq and found themselves on a convoy bound for Balad, forty miles north of Baghdad. There, on a U.S. base called Camp Anaconda—and known to soldiers as Mortarville, for its constant barrage of incoming mortar fire—they got more bad news. Instead of earning between fifteen hundred and thirty-eight hundred dollars a month, as they had been promised, the women were told that they would make only seven hundred dollars a month, a sum that was later reduced, under another subcontrac-

tor, to three hundred and fifty. "We were just all dumbstruck," Chanel Joy, who had earned several times as much working as a certified beauty therapist at a Fijian resort, recalled. "It was ridiculous, really, slave labor, absolutely ridiculous out here in a war zone." In the contract they signed in Iraq, their working hours were specified as "Twelve (12) hours per day and seven (7) days a week." Their "vacation" was a "Return ticket after the completion of the service." Appended to the contract was a legal waiver: "I am willingly and of my own free will have decided to go and work in Iraq, and I declare that no one in Fiji or out of Fiji has approach me to work in Iraq. . . . I am contented with my job. . . . I want to complete my contract, till then, I will not go back home." (A lawyer for Kulak Construction denied that the company had ever employed any women from Fiji, although the company's name appears on the women's contracts. He added, "Kulak has a good reputation for sixty years.")

For nearly two weeks, the ten women refused to do any work. "We decided we had to stick together," Chanel, a dignified older woman with a mane of auburn curls, recounted. "Desert Sisters—that's what we called each other." Eventually, they agreed to a revised deal offering them eight hundred dollars a month. It was better than being stranded with no pay. The next morning, the beauticians were separated, and sent to different military camps. Two stayed at Camp Anaconda; three were flown to Tikrit; two



"You realize they won't know the difference."

went to Camp Diamondback, in Mosul; and three—Vinnie, Lydia, and Melanie—ended up in Tal Afar, after stints in Tikrit and Mosul. Before boarding their flights, the women received body armor and a tutorial on rocket attacks: how to duck and dive, then sprint to the nearest bunker until the “all clear” sirens sounded.

Only then, Vinnie told me, did her situation truly sink in. Climbing into a military helicopter in her weighty new gear, she decided that she would have to pray each night that the Lord would send her home alive. “Am I going to get hurt?” she wondered, as the Black Hawk took off. “Am I going to get killed? Who’s going to take care of my family, my children? Please, God, give me protection.”

Not every third-country national makes it home safely. Since 2001, more than two thousand contractor fatalities and more than fifty-one thousand injuries have been reported in Iraq and Afghanistan. For the first time in American history, private-contractor losses are now on a par with those of U.S. troops in both war zones, amounting to fifty-three per cent of reported fatalities in the first six months of 2010. Since many T.C.N. deaths and injuries are never tallied—contractors are expected to self-report, with spotty compliance—the actual numbers are presumed to be higher.

Constantine Rodriguez, a soft-spoken thirty-eight-year-old from the former Portuguese colony of Goa, was working at a Pizza Hut at Camp Taji, Iraq, when an insurgent’s rocket struck. Two of his Bangladeshi co-workers died, according to a former boss, and Rodriguez lost an eye and a leg. Disabled, he was sent back to southern India, where he had a young wife and a baby to support. Although employees who are injured on U.S. bases are usually entitled to medical care and disability compensation, few foreign workers are aware of their rights, and fewer still are able to navigate the byzantine process required to receive payment.

If most Americans know nothing about this foreign workforce on U.S. bases, Al Qaeda and other extremist groups have taken notice. As early as 2004, Sunni militants launched a campaign to kill T.C.N.s. Their goal was to disrupt American supply chains by blowing up truckers, and to punish Third World Muslims who collaborated with

RECURRING AWAKENING

I stop a tall girl all in blue on the hall
and receive first a harried and desultory apology
then, point blank, news that you passed late last night.
You passed at three-thirty in the morning.
What is it, some sort of exam?
She smiles at herself,
epicenter of this
revelation, I find myself walking along
a high ridge in the wake of an ice storm
at the heart of some annihilated fairy tale
of forest in West Virginia,
a redwing blackbird’s
feet clenched to one crystal branch
per deceased tree: eyes stitched shut
and beak wide open.
And finally, there it is: your face, floating
at my feet with nose pressed to transparent black ice;
yes, you are certainly dead, all the signs point to it.
Wrapped in white cerements,
white face more youthful

“the infidels” and pressure governments to prevent their citizens from going abroad to work for Coalition troops. Over the summer and the early fall of 2004, the list of those kidnapped by insurgents included Turks, Pakistanis, Indonesians, Indians, Egyptians, Macedonians, Bulgarians, and Kenyans. In one particularly bloody incident, a caravan of Nepalese workers bound for a major U.S. airbase was taken captive. Eleven were shot dead, and one man was beheaded.

Despite these risks and harsh conditions, many T.C.N.s are grateful for their jobs. In my travels through Iraq and Afghanistan, I met dozens of workers like Paz Dizon, a Filipina cleaning woman employed by G3 Logistics at the hospital on Kandahar Airfield. (“Paz?” I repeated when she introduced herself, to which she replied, cheerfully, “Yes, like ‘Pass away!’”) She feels that she’s contributing something important to the war effort while earning a wage that far exceeds what she could make back home. At night, she snacks on Twinkies with the other Filipinas in her barracks; after rocket attacks, they sing eighties pop songs on a dust-covered karaoke machine. “We keep on teasing that the G3 ladies will die happy, singing and dancing,” her colleague Rey Villa Cacas told me with a giggle, describing how their boss belted out the lyrics to

“Soldier of Fortune” during the previous night’s mortar shelling.

At first, Vinnie, Lydia, and Melanie got along well in Iraq, too. After several months, the three were flown northwest to Forward Operating Base Sykes, where I first met them. They were working for another Turkish subcontractor, and were put under the supervision of a chain-smoking Turkish man in his twenties. They lived in air-conditioned shipping containers, played pool in the “morale, welfare, and recreation” hall, sang in Sunday church services, and ate meals in the main dining facility, which included a hot-sandwich bar, a wings-and-burgers grill, a “healthy choice” line, and an assortment of Baskin-Robbins ice cream. The AAFES beauty salon turned out to be pleasant, filled with soldiers in vinyl chairs, M-16 rifles at their feet, flipping through copies of *Maxim* as they awaited seven-dollar pedicures or five-dollar straight-razor shaves. Dated fashion posters hung on the walls, with eighties-style Madonna look-alikes (hoop earrings, feathered bangs) and inspirational words, like “Simplicity Is the Essence of Beauty” and “We’re Here for You!”

The three women had a knack for setting customers at ease. Vinnie would joke with soldiers about “putting the ‘man’ in manicure” or show off snapshots of her

and grave than I have ever seen it, frowning slightly
as though it were reading, one eye blind
in a blond swath of hair,
vague smile like the velvet depression
the lost diamond has left in its case;
now strangely you are moving
in a wide circle around me, stepping
sideways in time
to some slow stately dance
hand in hand
with the handless
in their identical absence
of affect, lips moving in unison.
I can't hear a thing, but it's said
the instant of being aware we are sleeping
and the instant of waking are one
and the same—and thus, against delusion
we possess this defense.
Only if you refuse
to respond, if I can only write you,
and write on black wind-blurred water, what's the use?

—*Franz Wright*

twelve-year-old son, Samuel, who liked to eat trays of her stir-fried chicken with cashew nuts. Lydia, as she worked, asked soldiers about their lives in the States: any girlfriends, kids, Harleys? Melanie, the shyest of the three, ended her pedicure sessions by inquiring, like a peppy travel agent, “Have you thought about taking your holiday in Fiji? You should come. It’s a beautiful place, like paradise, really. You can have your honeymoon there someday.” (She regularly extolled the virtues of Fiji-brand artesian bottled water, to the point that she came to be known around the base as “the Fiji Water lady.”)

Some customers would tease back, asking, “Why’d you choose to leave a nice place like Fiji for a shit-hole like this?” If the boss was out for a smoke and the man in the lavender swivel chair seemed trustworthy, the women would tell him. One sympathetic customer, an American private contractor, got in touch with associates in New York; a letter was sent to the Defense Department, requesting an official investigation into whether the women’s recruitment and working conditions were “exploitative.” Soon thereafter, the AAFES Inspector General dispatched a business manager to interview the beauticians. But the manager determined that, because the three had their passports and had known

their ultimate destination after arriving in Dubai, AAFES was not in violation of anti-trafficking regulations. (The organization did note that, in general, “better safeguards and improvements were necessary to protect contract workers.”)

Late one night in early April, 2008, I knocked on the door of Lydia and Vinnie’s shipping container to find Lydia curled up on the floor, knees to chest, chin to knees, crying. Vinnie told me, after some hesitation, that a supervisor had “had his way with” Lydia. According to the two women’s tearful account, non-consensual sex had become a regular feature of Lydia’s life. They said the man would taunt Lydia, calling her a “fucking bitch” and describing the various acts he would like to see her perform. Lydia trembled, her normally confident figure crumpled inward. “If he comes tonight, you have to scream,” Vinnie told Lydia, tapping her fist against the aluminum siding of the shipping container. “Bang on this wall here and scream!”

The next day, I dialed the U.S. Army’s emergency sexual-assault hot line, printed on a pamphlet distributed across the base that read, “Stand Up Against Sexual Assault... Make a Difference.” Nobody answered. Despite several calls over several days, the number simply rang and rang. (A U.S. Central Command spokesman, when later reached for

comment, noted, “We do track and investigate any report of criminal activity that occurs on our military bases.”)

Abuses like these weren’t supposed to be happening. In early 2006, after reports of human trafficking, the Department of Defense launched an investigation into subcontractors’ working conditions. Government inspectors listed “widespread” abuses, including the illegal confiscation of workers’ passports, “deceptive hiring practices,” “excessive recruiting fees,” and “substandard worker living conditions.”

That April, George W. Casey, then the commanding general for Iraq, issued an order to private contractors and subcontractors there, seeking to establish guidelines for humane treatment. For the first time, T.C.N.s were entitled to “measurable, enforceable standards for living conditions (e.g. sanitation, health, safety, etc.),” including “50 feet as the minimum acceptable square footage of personal living space per worker.” All U.S. troops would receive training to help them recognize human trafficking and abuse, and major contractors were ordered to design a mandatory anti-trafficking awareness session for their employees.

But the Pentagon’s “zero tolerance” policy for violators proved largely toothless. In one incident, in December, 2008, U.S. military personnel discovered that a warehouse operated off the base by a K.B.R. subcontractor, Najlala International Catering, was filled with more than a thousand workers who appeared to be human-trafficking victims. Many of the men were sent home, but Najlala retained its service contracts and won a new multimillion-dollar deal for operating a U.S.A.I.D. dining facility in the Green Zone.

A representative of Najlala’s associate firm in Amman, Jordan, told me that the workers’ mistreatment had been due to a temporary “cash money problem,” and a K.B.R. spokesman said that the company “fully disclosed the incident to our U.S. government clients including all remedial actions taken by both K.B.R. and Najlala.” What’s more, a K.B.R. spokesman said that “we actively encourage our employees to raise issues of concern through the proper channels and processes the company has in place.”

However, in some cases managers have clearly been dissuaded by their supe-

RECIPES FROM THE Mrs. Marquis de Sade COOKBOOK

World of Hurt Broccoli

Chop up a bunch of raw broccoli, throw it on a platter, and serve without dip. Invite people over, stand back, and enjoy.



Eggs Tormento

Scramble egg whites and cook them in canola oil. No matter how much you are begged, refuse to provide salt.



Dungeon Burgers

Form patties out of spelt and fat-free yogurt. Serve without mercy.



R. CW

riors from taking an interest in such matters. Soon after Mike Land, an American who was a K.B.R. foreman, complained about the living conditions of his Filipino and Indian men, he received an official reprimand: “You are expected to refrain from further involvement regarding the working and living conditions of the sub-contract workers as that is not your responsibility.... Any future interference with [the subcontractor’s] operations will result in additional action up to and including termination.” In Afghanistan, one high-ranking contracting officer told me that labor law “doesn’t exist here,” and that enforcement would be hard to prioritize if it did: the job “is to get the war fighters what they need.”

Still, the Obama Administration has made a point of talking about contractor accountability. Not long after taking office, in 2009, President Obama pledged to make good on his campaign promise to end the “lack of planning, oversight, and management of these contractors,” which “has repeatedly undermined our troops’ efforts in the field.” When Gen-

eral McChrystal assumed command of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, in June, 2009, he set out to reduce the role of T.C.N.s. He pushed a policy of “Afghanization,” bringing in local Afghan workers to replace third-country nationals whenever possible. Conventional wisdom held that allowing Afghans—or, in Iraq, Iraqis—to work on U.S. bases posed a grave security threat to troops. But the military’s new counter-insurgency doctrine turned this logic on its head. What if bringing in workers from Sierra Leone and Bangladesh rendered U.S. bases less safe, by alienating locals and occupying jobs they could perform? McChrystal saw an opportunity to make inroads with Afghanistan’s unemployed masses.

“Afghanization” turned out to be a tall order. Corruption meant that U.S. tax dollars were soon funnelling into the hands of Taliban insurgents. Even the process of getting Afghans on and off the bases proved exhausting, slowing down vital construction projects. By March, 2010, at the height of the Afghan First initiative,

the number of third-country nationals counted by the Department of Defense in Afghanistan had actually increased by nearly fifty per cent from the previous June, reaching seventeen thousand five hundred and twelve.

The “drawdown” of operations in Iraq, on the other hand, has created new difficulties for T.C.N.s there. Last summer, Colonel Richard E. Nolan, of the military’s contracting office, expressed concern that T.C.N.s were being abandoned on U.S. bases when their companies lost contracts or were ordered to shed numbers. I met several such workers, one of whom, a Popeye’s employee, had been told by a sympathetic boss to pack his bags, carry them to the office of a U.S. commander, and fall to his knees weeping, in the hope of being granted a ticket home.

At Kandahar Airfield, in Afghanistan, I talked to Joel Centeno, a Filipino who sat with his head buried in his hands on a picnic bench behind a T.G.I. Friday’s. A Pentagon subcontractor had laid him off but refused to provide him with a return

ticket. ("Thank you and appreciated your contribution to the team," his termination letter read.) Centeno was among the war's new breed of workers: adrift on U.S. bases, searching for work, unable to afford the ticket home, and fearful of loan sharks who await them there.

In early April, 2008, Vinnie and Lydia were told that they would be flying back to Fiji. (Not long after I began conducting interviews with the women, U.S. military personnel complained that they were "making trouble" on the base.) For them, the prospect of returning home was a godsend. "We're just counting the days," Lydia told customers. "Fresh fruit and beaches and our families." After boarding a U.S. military aircraft, they flew to Mosul to await processing. They said that they were held there for more than a month, and that their passports and identification badges were confiscated by their Turkish subcontractor. This meant they had no right of mobility; without an I.D., the U.S. military could detain them simply for going to the latrine or walking to the A.T.&T. phone booth to call their families. Even so, Lydia managed to get in touch with her husband and son on occasion. "Don't worry, Mommy's doing all right, I'll be home soon," she told them, to which her five-year-old responded, "Will you buy me a big gun?"

Finally, in the first week of May, they boarded a homebound flight. They carried a few souvenirs: their AAFES name-tags, snapshots in front of a sandbagged bunker, perfume from an Iraqi contractor, and an oversized black T-shirt for Lydia's son that read, in both English and Arabic, "Caution Stay 100 Meters Back or You Will Be Shot."

When Vinnie arrived home, she found her whole family waiting up by a lantern on a big ceremonial *kuta* mat on the living-room floor—all but her youngest, Samuel, who hid under a blanket in a nearby room, ashamed that he'd grown chubbier in her absence, and frightened that his mother wouldn't recognize him. "It's your mama," Vinnie coaxed him. "Come out from under there!" When he finally emerged, Vinnie held him in her arms.

Vinnie passed several weeks with her children and her husband, cooking big meals and singing gospel tunes. Eventually, she went back to work styling hair at

the Rever Beauty Salon. Lydia and her husband had a baby girl. "It took me, like, four months to get away from my own head," she recalls. "I was sleeping in the day and waking up in the night, so many negative stories. . . . I just wanted to take my son to school and pick him up." Melanie arrived home a few months later, equally relieved. She busied herself with wedding plans and got a job at the Pure Fiji Spa, where customers are instructed to "step lightly over running waters . . . leaving behind cares and the outside world as if on a far distant shore."

Then one afternoon in the fall of 2009, Vinnie heard on the radio that the police were calling for people who had been defrauded by Meridian Services Agency to come forward with their stories. She learned that the company had reportedly conned more than twenty thousand Fijian workers into paying large fees for fraudulent "Middle East jobs." Meridian's director, a portly local named Timoci Lolohea, had, according to the *Fiji Times*, extracted more than \$1.6 million from his victims over the previous five years; they included not only poor workers but also church congregations, tribal elders, and village community centers seeking overseas employment for their constituents. In the lush farming region of Waimaro, one village spokesman produced receipts to show that Lolohea had collected the equivalent of as much as twenty-seven thousand dollars—a Fijian windfall—from thirteen impoverished villages in exchange for jobs in Kuwait which never materialized. The devastation from Lolohea's recruiting scheme was so widespread that the deputy director of the Fijian police created a special task force to investigate it.

When several human-rights litigators in Washington, D.C., learned, through my investigation, of the beauticians' experiences, they flew Vinnie to the U.S. to hear the details of her case. I sat in on several days of interviews with labor experts. Her trip culminated in a meeting with State Department officials, at which Vinnie spoke with purpose about her false re-

cruitment and subsequent mistreatment. She spoke, too, of her children, and the months she'd spent away from them while serving U.S. soldiers in the salon.

After the meeting, Ambassador at Large Luis CdeBaca, the director of the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, notified officials at AAFES and the Office of the Secretary of Defense about the allegations, and urged them to investigate. "We're going to make sure that Secretary Clinton is aware of these allegations," he wrote in a February, 2010, e-mail to Defense Department officials, first obtained by the Project on Government Oversight. Soon thereafter, the women's story began to circulate among Army officials in a classified PowerPoint presentation, distributed by the U.S. Army Inspector General School. "Army policy opposes any and all activities associated with human trafficking," the briefing notes, adding, in red ink, "No leader will turn a blind eye to this issue!"

Yet, when reporters asked the U.S. Army's Criminal Investigation Command (C.I.D.) for details last summer, they were told that allegations of the women's mistreatment had been investigated earlier and were "not substantiated." (According to an internal AAFES report, "allegations of rape never surfaced" in the organization's prior investigation of the women's recruitment.) C.I.D. officials declined to say whether any victims had been interviewed, and, when reached recently, a C.I.D. spokesman apologized for being unable to locate any record of the case. According to the spokesman, "C.I.D. takes allegations of sexual assault very seriously and fully investigates allegations where there is credible information that a crime may have occurred involving Army personnel or others accompanying the force." Lydia and Vinnie both say that no one from the military or AAFES spoke with them about the sexual-assault claims.

In the three years since Vinnie and Lydia returned from Iraq, thousands of third-country nationals have tried to make their grievances known, sometimes spectacularly. Previously unreported worker riots have erupted on U.S. bases over issues such as lack of food and unpaid wages. On May 1, 2010, in a labor camp run by Prime Projects International (P.P.I.) on the largest military base in



Baghdad, more than a thousand subcontractors—primarily Indians and Nepalis—rampaged, using as weapons fists, stones, wooden bats, and, as one U.S. military policeman put it, “anything they could find.”

The riot started as a protest over a lack of food, according to a whippet-thin worker in the camp named Subramanian. A forty-five-year-old former rice farmer from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, Subramanian worked twelve-hour days cleaning the military’s fast-food court. Around seven o’clock on the evening of the riot, Subramanian returned to the P.P.I. compound and lined up for dinner with several thousand other workers. But the cooks ran out of food, with at least five hundred left to feed. This wasn’t the first time; empty plates had become common in the camp during the past year. Several of the men stormed over to the management’s office, demanding more rice. When management refused, he recalls, dozens more entered the fray, then hundreds, and ultimately more than a thousand. Employees started to throw gravel

at the managers. Four-foot pieces of plywood crashed through glass windows. Workers broke down the door to the food cellar and made off with as much as they could carry.

The riot spread through the vast camp. At one point, as many as fourteen hundred men were smashing office windows, hurling stones, destroying computers, raiding company files, and battering the entrance to the camp where a large blue-and-white sign reads “Treat others how you want to be treated. . . . No damaging P.P.I. property that has been built for your comfort.” (According to an investigation conducted by K.B.R., “P.P.I. employees . . . became agitated after being told they’d experience a delay while additional food was prepared.” “Upon full assessment of the incident,” a company spokesperson relayed in a written statement, “K.B.R. notified P.P.I. management of the need for changes to prevent any recurrence and worked with the subcontractor to implement those corrective actions.”)

Only when U.S. military police ar-

rived—followed by Ugandan security guards—did the camp fall quiet. Some workers attempted to hide, though there wasn’t anywhere to go—just a sea of gravel dotted by an archipelago of dismal white shipping containers, in which workers slept in tightly packed rows of creaky bunks with colorful towels draped between them for privacy.

“Almost every window in the camp was destroyed, food everywhere,” Sergeant Jonathan Trivett, one of the first U.S. military policemen to the scene, recalls. “They pretty well destroyed the entire camp. . . . It was shocking.” Trivett, a handsome twenty-five-year-old with an aw-shucks Indiana smile, later gave me a tour of the camp, which M.P.s now patrol twice daily to insure that nothing “out of the ordinary” is taking place. (“Lotta love, buddy,” he greets the guards at the gate.) His police team did its best to investigate the rioters’ motives, but most workers, including Subramanian, were too terrified to talk, and the majority spoke little or no English. Three military policemen under Sergeant Trivett’s supervision that night later received Army Achievement Medals for their role in quelling the rampage.

Several weeks after the riot, the defiant mood spread to other parts of the base. Workers in the neighboring camp of Gulf Catering Company (G.C.C.), another subcontractor, staged a copycat riot, pelting their bosses with stones and accusing the company of failing to pay them their proper wages. That same week, more G.C.C. employees en route from a base in Balad set fire to their barracks to protest unpaid wages. Several buildings burned to the ground.

This was not unprecedented. In 2008, in another nearby labor compound, a rumpiled Iraqi businessman named Alaa Noori Habeb faced a similar horde of rioting workers. At the time, he ran a Baghdad warehouse for a company called Elite Home Group, which sheltered and fed hundreds of foreign K.B.R. subcontractors in conditions that were, he admitted, foul. As Habeb flipped through photos of the incident, he told me how Nepalis in his compound erupted in rage—ripping up mattresses, tearing out electrical boxes, and destroying company computers. A manager at yet another K.B.R. subcontractor camp in Baghdad, Ziad Al Karawi, de-

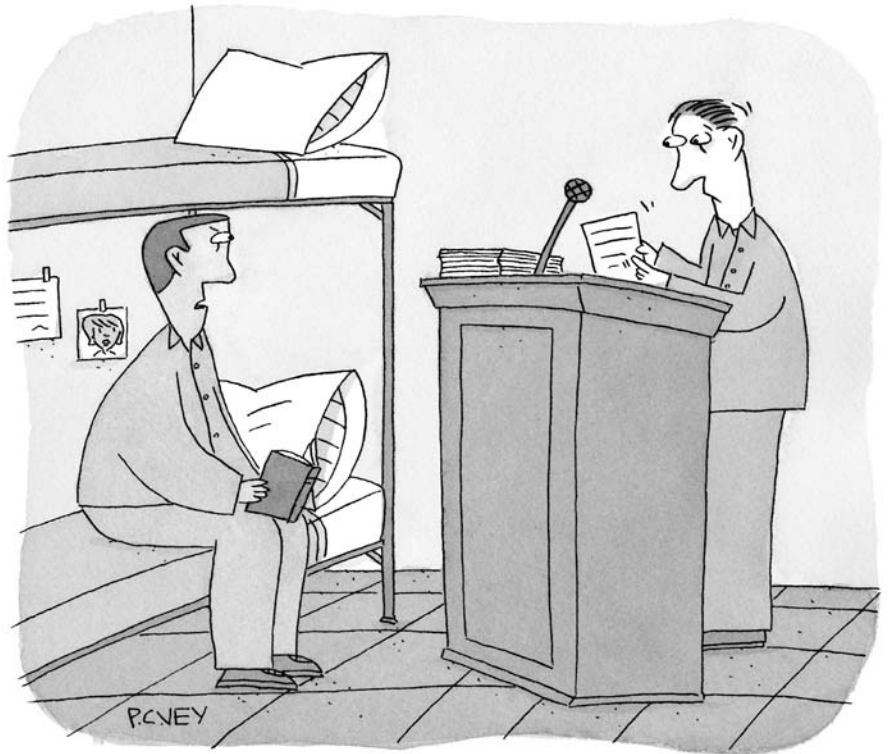


CANADA GEESE

scribed how a thousand Indian and Sri Lankan men under his supervision slept on crowded floors: “rats and flies attacked us. . . . We had no beds to sleep at or tables to eat at. . . . No communication, no TV, no soap to wash or bathe, no visits from anyone from the company or K.B.R. . . . The workers had no choice except going out in a protest.”

In the wake of various uprisings, workers have been reprimanded and sent home. K.B.R. insists that its “business ethics and values” require that employees and subcontractors are treated with “dignity and respect,” that it adheres to U.S. government guidelines for the treatment of workers, and that it “follows rigorous policies, procedures, and training,” to protect the welfare of foreign-national workers. But, even after investigations by K.B.R. and the military, little seems to change. A spokesman for U.S. Central Command acknowledged that it “does not play a formal role in the monitoring of living conditions on U.S. bases,” although each base has a military chain of command responsible for “working with the entities involved to insure minimum standards are met.” Government officials rarely learn of these riots, most of which take place in compounds watched over by private guards. Nor do major media outlets. “We thought the journalists would come,” Imtiyas Sheriff, a thirty-eight-year-old G.C.C. bus driver and father from Sri Lanka, told me. “They call this Operation Iraqi Freedom, but where is our freedom?” Still, many of the workers have faith that the U.S. military wants to do right by them. In fact, the majority view American soldiers and marines as their sole protectors. “The American people are a good people,” the round-faced Sheriff said to me more than once, as we crouched in a sweltering bunker. “They will help us, if they know what is happening.”

Back in Fiji, Vinnie and Lydia’s quest for accountability has proved fruitless. Spotting one of her “lying bastard” recruiters on the street not long ago, Vinnie ran up to him, scolding, “How can you show your face around here?” Lydia and several of the other women stormed the offices of Meridian Services, demanding that the men answer for their actions and take down a photograph they’d posted, from a Fijian social-net-



“Save it for the parole board.”

working Web site, of Lydia, Vinnie, and three other beauticians on a U.S. base emblazoned with the words “Salsa Nite! Mosul, Iraq. No wonder I haven’t been seeing them in town. Lovely hairdressers. . . . Take care ladies!” Before she left, Lydia warned the men that it’s a small world. “Next time,” she told them, “don’t you take all these ladies and fool them.”

The Fijian press has denounced Timoci Lolohea, Meridian’s director, as a “fraudster” and “con artist.” But some Fijian officials seemed to have condoned such activities, in the hope of bringing remittances from U.S. military operations. “The government knows that more men are leaving for Kuwait and Iraq and it is a good thing, because it is providing employment for the unemployed,” Fiji’s Minister for Labor, Kenneth Zinck, said back in 2005. Zinck was initially assigned to lead the government investigation into Meridian’s practices. In July of 2010, Lolohea (who did not respond to requests for comment) pleaded not guilty to charges of unlawful recruiting.

Through it all, Lolohea’s employment empire has remained. Recently, he put up a placard outside his house, ad-

vertising jobs in Dubai. He also opened a new office in Suva, where, each morning, throngs of workers have been lining up outside his gate. They bring their passports and pockets stuffed with borrowed cash. They are undeterred by the large white sign at the entrance, which the police have ordered Lolohea to post, reading, “NO Recruitment Until Further Notice.” Most have heard the rumors about Lolohea’s shady past, and they know that he was long denounced in the local newspapers as one of “Fiji’s most wanted men.” But they’ve also heard that he’s offering a starting salary of six thousand dollars a month to prospective security guards and military logistics workers for his new company, Phoenix Logistics Corporation Limited. And so the crowds keep flocking to his illicit office in the midst of the rainy season—most of them eager young men in baggy jeans and baseball caps, or in traditional *sulu* skirts, but also the occasional woman, her head filled with dreams of a life in the City of Gold. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM/GO/ASK

Sarah Stillman takes questions from readers.