GUNS AND BREAD

It's not unusual to see private security companies in conflict-hit regions – but as deliverers of development? MICHAEL LEWIS on the khaki future of international aid.

I am looking at a photograph that I cannot reconcile with my memory. A row of bright blue water tanks and shiny pipes sits hopefully on the red earth of a tree-ringed clearing: a water treatment plant under construction outside Conakry in the fragile West African state of Guinea.

The photograph, taken in January 2010, was sent to me by Major-General David Tsur, former commander of the Israeli border police. Tsur now works for Global-CST, perhaps Israel's most active private military company. The company has provided counter-terrorism advice in Colombia and military instructors in Georgia. Incongruously, Global-CST's logo is also emblazoned on Conakry's gleaming water tanks.

My own recollections of Conakry around this time are dominated by different images. Three months before this photograph was taken, *gendarmes* and *berets rouges* presidential commandos, acting for the CNDD military regime that had seized power the year before, opened fire on a peaceful protest inside Conakry's football stadium. Over 150 people were killed and at least 40 women publicly raped. Six weeks after the massacre, I sat with colleagues from a human rights organization in the darkened office of a senior military officer as he emphatically justified his subordinates' actions. The protestors, he insisted, were part of a violent Islamic plot 'threatening the country's national character'.

On his desk lay a glossy brochure for a company called GLS Global Law Enforcement & Security Ltd: a subsidiary of Global-CST, I later learned. To my surprise, six days later in a Conakry suburb I met a nervous young man who described being hired to work for this company at a former *gendarmerie* camp outside Forecariah, 70 kilometres southwest of the capital. There he witnessed nearly a thousand youths dressed in football shirts with 'regiment commandos' written on their backs, being drilled with Kalashnikovs to defend Guinea's military regime – an account corroborated by Guinean army officers and another

camp worker. Training the recruits, he claimed, were Israeli and South African instructors with 'GLS' printed on their T-shirts and caps.

Tsur's company denies any involvement in the Forecariah training, and there is no suggestion that it was in any way implicated in the stadium massacre. In May 2010, however, Israel's defence ministry announced that Global-CST had been fined for negotiating to supply arms and military training to the Guinean regime without prior approval. Global-CST claims this was a misunderstanding, admitting that they signed a contract for 'a certain security project' a few days before their official licence arrived. Tsur insists his company's focus now is 'to substantially improve the distribution of safe drinking water' to the people of Conakry.

We may never know for certain who did what during the chaotic final months of Guinea's military regime. But Global-CST's incongruous mix of water pumps and military assistance is not unique. Tsur's company sits at the far end of a complex private marketplace offering both military and civilian aid to beleaguered governments. At a more transparent end of this market, companies previously labelled dogs of war are quietly diversifying into the war on poverty. In the process they are challenging the purposes and limits of aid itself.

One early starter was London-based Aegis Defence Services, founded by Lieutenant-Colonel Tim Spicer. Spicer had previously run Sandline International, named in a British government investigation for delivering arms in 1998 to Sierra Leone, then under UN arms embargo. In 2004, his new company famously won the US-led Coalition's largest outsourced security contract in post-invasion Iraq, worth over $620 million.

Aegis also set up its own humanitarian charity, the Aegis Foundation, inoculating communities and renovating Iraqi schools alongside the US Army units whose personnel they were guarding. (Former BBC war reporter Kate Adie is now a trustee.)

Justin Marozzi, who established the Aegis Foundation's Iraq operations, insists they aimed simply to fill gaps where violence prevented traditional aid organizations from operating.

But, in a 2006 paper for the military thinktank RUSI, Aegis analyst Dominick Diamond threw down the gauntlet to non-governmental organizations (NGOs). 'The Global War on Terror will increasingly involve the UK's use of soft power,' he wrote, opening the way for private security companies to replace humanitarian and development NGOs that 'refused to accept funds for projects from governments operating as part of the Coalition'.

For governments fighting wars, the 'soft power' of winning hearts and minds is precisely the appeal of integrating aid with security – and its potential danger. Sandrine Tiller from Médecins Sans Frontières, which for 40 years has provided medical care in conflicts from Biafra to Mogadishu, says such practices 'put our patients at risk, as they can easily be accused to be collaborating with one of the armed groups. For aid workers too, this breeds suspicion that all aid comes with strings attached.'

In Somalia, for example, the brutal opposition group Al-Shabaab has twice bombed hospitals run by the African Union's AMISOM force that fights alongside Somali government forces, and has told Somalis not to use them.

Yet for one organization working in Mogadishu's hospitals, separating 'humanitarian' and 'military' aid is disingenuous. Michael Stock runs Bancroft Global Development, a registered US charity founded in 1999 to clear landmines in the former Yugoslavia. Bancroft's 40-strong team now mentor hospital staff, Stock says, and advise the Somali transitional government on 'strategy' and 'infrastructure'. More controversially, Bancroft's ex-military instructors – one previously convicted under South Africa's anti-mercenary laws – also train AMISOM troops and the Somali army itself.

'I think there is a real ethical flaw [with aid agencies] that believe, almost with religious fervour, that there should be division between humanitarian assistance and political-military-economic strategy,' Stock says. 'They're not as interested in difficult, longer-term problems... Which side are they on?'

Stock argues that some humanitarian organizations in Somalia are already complicit in the conflict. 'Self-appointed, unelected and unaccountable, they're performing inherent functions of government and competing with both government and armed groups for the adherence of the local population. They are in fact suppressing the emergence of a Somali government.'

Stock also contests hospital statistics cited by Human Rights Watch in claims that indiscriminate firing by the forces Bancroft now supports have killed hundreds of

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Mogadishu civilians. Some of these figures, he says, are 'inherently implausible' and 'manipulated for propaganda or fundraising purposes'. And with Bancroft's help, Stock insists, AMISOM forces have almost eliminated indiscriminate shelling.

Such help goes beyond training. Invoices filed in a previously unreported court case show that in April 2010 Bancroft bought 18,000 battle dress uniforms and 6,000 (empty) pistol belts, to be shipped to the Somali army through a Ugandan partner company. When asked, Stock argues this is entirely in keeping with Bancroft's mission, listed on its charitable tax-exemption filings as 'removing violence from public discourse, by promoting permanent solutions to the economic, environmental and societal harm caused by armed conflict'. '[Equipment] was the *sine qua non* of the training; our protégés needed adequate clothing. We've always been an educational organization.'

Stock's business model is growing. Since 2004, members of the International Stability Operations Association – the US trade association for private security companies – have received grants of over $740 million from the US Agency for International Development for aid projects from community development in Bolivia to water management in Egypt. Flexible private operators run hospitals and advise embattled governments, as well as training – and sometimes equipping – their armies. The future of international aid may well look like this. ■

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