

GI SPECIAL 6D4:

“SADR’S ATTACK”



Boys salvage parts from a burnt Maliki occupation regime military vehicle destroyed by the nationalist Mehdi Army on the roadside in Basra March 29, 2008. The words read: “Sadr’s attack”. REUTERS/Atef Hassan

The Wheels Come Off “All Three Of The Factors Holding Down The Violence Are Unwinding At The Same Time, Which Is A Pretty Big Deal”

3.27.08 By Yochi J. Dreazen And Gina Chon, Wall St. Journal [Excerpts]

WASHINGTON—This week’s spike in violence in Baghdad and the southern Iraqi city of Basra raises the prospect that the factors that suppressed Iraq’s bloodshed in recent months could be evaporating simultaneously.

U.S. and Iraqi officials have credited Iraq's recent security gains to three distinct but related trends: the "surge" of 30,000 additional U.S. combat forces, the willingness of Sunni tribal fighters to turn against religious extremists, and a cease-fire by firebrand Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

But the surge troops have begun leaving Iraq and will be back in the U.S. by July.

Many of the Sunni fighters — known as "concerned local citizens, or CLCs, in military parlance — are threatening to resume attacking Iraqi targets if they aren't given government jobs.

And Mr. Sadr's militants have been battling Iraqi forces in recent days and talking darkly about escalating the violence if no armistice is reached.

"If the two wheels fall off — the CLCs turn back into insurgents and the Sadr cease-fire starts to fray — you're likely to see a huge uptick in the violence," said Cohn Kahi, a security-studies professor at Georgetown University.

"All three of the factors holding down the violence are unwinding at the same time, which is a pretty big deal."

MORE:

“President Bush Was Right That Basra Marked A Defining Moment For Iraq, But Not In The Way That He Intended”

“Mr. Sadr Appears To Be The One Clear Winner”

“The Fighting Has Left Mr. Maliki Looking Weaker”

“Sadr's Mahdi Army Fought The Iraqi Forces To A Draw”



A pair of shoes, the supreme symbol of loathing and contempt in Iraq, are placed above an empty coffin with signs that read 'Maliki government,' during a protest in Baghdad's Kadhimiya district March 27, 2008. (Ceerwan Aziz/Reuters)

Sadr's Mahdi Army fought the Iraqi forces to a draw

[Thanks to New York City Labor Against The War

By YOCHI J. DREAZEN, April 1, 2008; Wall St. Journal & By ABIGAIL HAUSLOHNER, BAGHDAD, Time Magazine [Excerpts]

Inability to oust Moqtada al-Sadr's militia from Basra has boosted the fortunes of the Shiite cleric while damaging the standing of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Mr. Sadr appears to be the one clear winner from the inconclusive fighting in the country's second-biggest city, which began to taper off Monday after the cleric urged his followers to observe a truce.

Worsening conditions in Iraq pose a particular challenge for likely Republican nominee Sen. John McCain, who has staked his candidacy on his ability to persuade antiwar voters that victory in Iraq remains possible.

U.S. and British commanders said that Mr. Sadr's Mahdi Army fought the Iraqi forces to a draw and were able to retain their control over large portions of Basra and other Shiite areas of the country.

Militants linked to Mr. Sadr also showed an ability to inflict pain on the U.S., killing two American officials in sophisticated mortar attacks against the heavily fortified Green Zone in Baghdad in recent days.

U.S. officials said that Mr. Sadr was in a stronger political position, as well, because of the public perception that Mr. Maliki ordered the strikes to weaken the cleric and his followers ahead of provincial elections scheduled for October.

If the elections were held today, “there is no doubt in my mind whatsoever that Sadrists would win across the south,” said a U.S. official at the American Embassy in Baghdad who monitors Iraqi politics.

Mr. Bush and top administration officials expressed strong public support for Mr. Maliki, arguing that his willingness to wager much of his remaining personal prestige and political capital on the assault showed that the Iraqi premier was finally emerging as a strong, decisive leader.

Instead, the fighting has left Mr. Maliki looking weaker.

Mr. Maliki moved to Basra to personally oversee the assault and issued several high-profile public demands for Mr. Sadr’s followers to surrender and relinquish their weapons.

But the Shiite militants rejected that ultimatum and were able to prevent the Iraqi forces from retaking the city.

Mr. Maliki instead had to turn to Mr. Sadr for a way out of the bloodshed, which left hundreds dead.

Mr. Sadr obliged Sunday with a truce offer that ordered his followers to stop fighting but made clear they were to keep their weapons -- ensuring that the primary goal of the Iraqi assault would go unmet.

“President Bush was right that Basra marked a defining moment for Iraq, but not in the way that he intended,” said Vali Nasr, a scholar of Shiite politics at Tufts University who has advised U.S. policy makers.

“This is the birth of Sadrist power.”

Mr. Nasr said that the biggest loser in the Basra fighting was Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim, who has been battling Mr. Sadr for control of southern Iraq for several years.

Mr. Hakim is an American ally who leads Iraq’s biggest Shiite political party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, or ISCI.

Mr. Hakim’s forces have gradually taken control of several large Shiite regions, including the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf, but they have been unable to extend their reach into Basra, a stronghold of Mr. Sadr and his followers.

Mr. Nasr argues that the fighting in Basra was intended to strengthen Mr. Hakim’s hand by killing large numbers of Mr. Sadr’s followers and leaving forces loyal to Mr. Hakim in control of swaths of the southern port city.

The government’s inability to oust Mr. Sadr means that the Shiite cleric is now in a better position than his rival Mr. Hakim, Mr. Nasr said.

“If the objective was to downsize Sadr, he emerges even more powerful politically and militarily,” Mr. Nasr said. “The dreams of ISCI emerging as the sole power in southern Iraq are over.”

In what was intended to be a show of strength for the Iraqi government in the end became an opportunity for Sadr’s militia to prove that it could put up a fight.

Ultimately, it was Sadr who drew the outlines of the ceasefire, not Maliki.

And so for Maliki’s government, this “win” may be little more than a success at avoiding utter chaos in the final hour of a military initiative gone terribly wrong.

MORE:

“The Iraqi Government Looks Silly”

‘Many Said The Militia Had Bested The Iraqi Forces At Nearly Every Confrontation’

“The Iraqi Military Doesn’t Have The Ability To Do Much Of Anything”



A government forces vehicle destroyed in fighting with the Mahdi Army in Basra, Iraq, March 28, 2008. (AP Photo/Nabil al-Jurani)

A senior government official who asked for anonymity due to the sensitivity of the subject agreed that it was unlikely that the Mahdi Army would be defeated militarily.

March 31, 2008 By Leila Fadel, McClatchy Newspapers [Excerpts]

“There is no change in our path, no negotiations from the government side,” Maliki adviser Sadiq al Rikabi said.

But few others, from foreign analysts to Basra residents, saw the end of the fighting as a victory for Maliki, who’d said repeatedly that he would not negotiate with Mahdi Army militants.

“The Iraqi government looks silly in the face of their ardent statements,” said Joost Hiltermann, the deputy program director for the Middle East and North Africa at the International Crisis Group, a private group that studies international conflicts.

He said the outcome shows “the Iraqi military doesn’t have the ability to do much of anything.”

Sadr, who was in Iran during the offensive, came out of the confrontation stronger, Hiltermann said.

Ali Mahdi, an English teacher in Basra and father of two whose home lies between two Mahdi Army-controlled neighborhoods, offered a blunt assessment.

“Maliki failed,” he said. He echoed Hiltermann’s analysis of what the outcome showed:

“They are so weak in everything, their army, their behavior towards the people, they did nothing for us.”

That realization made people fear that fighting could break out again, Mahdi said, noting that he had watched Iraqi troops flee before Mahdi Army members.

“We are so afraid of tomorrow. The Iraqi Army is in the street but (the fighting) showed that the militia is still stronger than the Iraqi Army.”

Many said the militia had bested the Iraqi forces at nearly every confrontation.

“The Iraqi Army is equipped with heavy machines and the Mahdi Army has simple weapons, but they have the doctrine to become martyrs,” said Hussein

Mohammed, who lives in the Mahdi stronghold of al Hayaniyah, which government forces tried, but failed, to penetrate.

“The national army did not win the battle.”

A senior government official who asked for anonymity due to the sensitivity of the subject agreed that it was unlikely that the Mahdi Army would be defeated militarily.

MORE:

“Have A Chocolate. This Is For Our Victory Over Maliki”

“The Mahdi Army Is The People. They Didn’t Come From The Moon,” He Said:

“The Military Operations Against The Occupation Forces In Iraq Will Continue Until The Last Soldier Of The Occupation Leaves Iraq”

“Others At The Compound Compared Maliki To The Late Hussein”



A demonstrator attaches a picture of Moqtada al-Sadr on her forehead as she takes part in a protest against the Maliki government and the occupation in Baghdad's Sadr City March 27, 2008. (Kareem Raheem/Reuters)

April 1, 2008 By Ned Parker and Raheem Salman, Los Angeles Times Staff Writers & Apr 2 By QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA, Associated Press Writer [Excerpts]

BAGHDAD -- In a stucco compound at the center of the Sadr City neighborhood here, a follower of radical Shiite Muslim cleric Muqtada Sadr gleefully handed out candies and toffees to visitors Monday.

"Have a chocolate," the thin, bearded man said.

"This is for our victory over Maliki."

On the edge of Sadr City, where a vehicle ban was still being enforced, an Iraqi army officer stared at a giant mural of Sadr's father, a grand ayatollah who died under the regime of Saddam Hussein and the man for whom the Baghdad district is named.

As an explosion sounded in the distance, the Iraqi officer said the Mahdi Army had better weapons than the government soldiers did, including rocket-propelled grenades and newer machine guns.

He acknowledged that some policemen from Sadr City were active members of the militia and that others had offered their tacit support.

Inside Sadr City, a policeman navigated the roads, which had been booby-trapped with bombs in case the Americans tried to enter.

He said the militia planted the explosives at night and detonated them by remote control. But he wasn't worried.

He pointed to an area where he said a U.S. armored vehicle had burned, sending flames into a police station and market.

"When they see a police car coming, they don't detonate the explosive because they don't see police as targets," the officer said.

At Sadr's compound, in a room decorated with plastic flowers, Sheik Salman Freiji, head of the Sadr organization in east Baghdad, called on parliament to force Maliki to resign. He also warned that although the Sadrist were now observing a cease-fire, it was still legitimate to fight the Americans.

"The military operations against the occupation forces in Iraq will continue until the last soldier of the occupation leaves Iraq," Freiji said.

Others at the compound compared Maliki to the late Hussein, criticizing the prime minister for targeting the Mahdi Army and not other groups in the oil-rich port of Basra.

Outside an auto parts shop, U.S. helicopter fire had left a crater.

The shop's owner swore he would fight U.S. troops if they attacked his neighborhood.

"The Mahdi Army is the people.

"They didn't come from the moon," he said.

Black banners announcing the deaths of Mahdi Army fighters plaster the streets. Scores of Shiite militiamen gather at the funeral of a fallen comrade as a U.S. helicopter gunship hovers above.

The Baghdad district of Sadr City bears the scars of recent fighting, but those loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr are showing a renewed confidence after his Madhi Army militiamen rose up against an Iraqi government crackdown last week in the southern city of Basra.

Radios on many of the minibuses blared songs in praise of al-Sadr and his father.

"I love al-Sadr because he heals my wounds. You cannot blame me for feeling like that," sang a male voice in one of the hymn-like songs.

The graffiti on the walls speak of the defiance of al-Sadr's followers.

"No, no to occupation," says one.

"We will never be humiliated," reads another.

Al-Maliki, who returned to Baghdad on Tuesday after a week in Basra running his ill-fated security crackdown, is the subject of some of the more scathing graffiti.

"Down with al-Maliki," declares one. "Al-Maliki is treasonous," charges another.



Shia fighters check their weapons following battle with Iraqi government forces in Basra.
Photograph: Essam Al-Sudani/AFP/Getty Images 4.2.08

MORE:

No, It's Not Over



An Iraqi armoured vehicle lies on its side after it was hit by a roadside bomb attack by Mahdi Army fighters in Basra April 2, 2008. The Basra joint operations center announced that a gun battle broke out during a raid and an Iraqi army vehicle was set on fire. (Atef Hassan/Reuters)

NOTICE:

As activity by and for troops against the war increases, that takes time away from GI Special work.

The April 5 Military Project Conference is a perfect example.

That means it's not possible to publish or reply with thanks as often for the fine news and letters sent in by troops, military family members, veterans, and civilians who understand why nothing is more likely to shorten the war than reaching out to the troops person to person, face to face, including the National Guards and Reserves who live right next to you.

It's very hard to fight a war without an armed force willing to do it.

So, please accept this way of expressing respect for and hand in hand solidarity with everybody who sends in all the good stuff. T.

IRAQ WAR REPORTS

Baghdad IED Kills U.S. Soldier

March 31, 2008 Public Affairs Office, Camp Victory RELEASE No. 20080331-14

BAGHDAD – A Multi-National Division – Center Soldier was killed as a result of an improvised explosive device attack south of Baghdad March 23.

The Soldier died of his wounds at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Landstuhl, Germany March 29.

Mourners Bid Farewell To Army Corporal Killed In Iraq

March 18, 2008 By ROSANNA RUIZ, Houston Chronicle

The portrait of Cpl. Scott Alexander McIntosh, in his formal Army uniform with his transfixed blue eyes, stood on an easel in the church's foyer.

Beyond his gaze, mourners sat in pews near his casket, covered by a gold ceremonial cloth.

The Humble native was known as a fun-loving, free spirit who crammed as much as he could into his 26 years before being killed by a suicide bomber on March 10 in Baghdad.

McIntosh, who enlisted before the U.S. embarked upon a war with Iraq five years ago, is the 95th service member with ties to the Houston area to have died there.

"Nothing could get him down — he always got the most out of life," said Eric McIntosh, his only sibling, from a lectern at St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church on Tuesday. "He wanted everyone around him to be comfortable and happy."

Scott McIntosh, he said, was a master charmer who could engage and "take control" of any room he entered. His ultimate goal was to always have fun at whatever he was doing.

McIntosh took his service to his country seriously, his brother said. He enlisted in the Army about five years ago because he wanted to protect people he cared for, "for all of you here today."

During one summer camp, the younger McIntosh was having a difficult time adjusting to being away from home for the first time. Scott McIntosh encouraged his brother to tough it out, and he even went so far as to leave his newfound friends behind to stay with Eric in his cabin.

"As long as he was with me, I was OK," Eric McIntosh said.

The most difficult task for the McIntosh family this week was selecting an inscription that will go on Scott McIntosh's grave marker.

"The military gave us about 15 different phrases to pick from," Eric McIntosh said during his speech at the start of Tuesday's service. "But the one we gravitated towards was 'His spirit is forever.' The reason being because it's true. You are all here because Scott meant something to you. My parents and I take comfort that wherever he is, he's making someone happy."

Afterward, Maj. Gen. Keith Huber presented McIntosh's parents, Alex and Gwenn McIntosh, with their son's Purple Heart and Bronze Star.

Scott McIntosh graduated from Cypress Creek High School in 2001 and enlisted in the Army about a year later.

Four other soldiers who were with McIntosh were also killed. All were assigned to the 1st Battalion, 64th Armor Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division at Fort Stewart, Ga.

McIntosh was buried with military honors at the Houston National Cemetery.

REALLY BAD PLACE TO BE: ALL HOME NOW



A damaged U.S. military vehicle after a roadside bomb explosion in the area of Al-leg, south of Baghdad March 7, 2008. (AP Photo/Petros Giannakouris)

South Texas Soldier One Of Four To Push Iraq Death Toll To 4,000

March 27, 2008 By CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN, The Associated Press

MISSION - Before he returned to duty in Iraq, Army Spc. Jose "Joe" Rubio Hernandez told his family that it would likely be the last time they saw him alive.

Rubio, 24, and three other soldiers died Monday, a day after a roadside bomb exploded near their vehicle in Baghdad. Their deaths tipped the war's death toll for American soldiers over the 4,000 mark.

During a visit to his border hometown in January, Rubio was stunned by how much his son Nikolai - now 11 months - had grown. His family was struck by his appearance, his brother and wife said Thursday.

Rubio had lost almost 30 pounds, confessed to sleeping only a couple hours per night in Iraq and ate little of his mother's Mexican homecooking. He told them he was scared.

Before he left he stared into the eyes of older brother Edgar Rubio and said, "Do you realize this is going to be the last time you see me?" Edgar recalled Thursday.

Killed with Rubio were Pvt. George Delgado, 21, of Palmdale, Calif., Staff Sgt. Christopher M. Hake, 26, of Enid, Okla. and Pfc. Andrew J. Habsieger, 22, of Festus, Mo. They were assigned to the 4th Battalion, 64th Armor Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division at Fort Stewart, Ga.

"He wanted to be known for something and now he is," said his wife Jennifer Guerra, Nikolai asleep in her arms.

It was an abrupt end for Rubio, the youngest of nine siblings. He was the family's most educated - he had an associates degree in computer science and hoped one day to earn a doctorate - and was on the verge of becoming the family's first American citizen.

Rubio had filled out the paperwork for becoming a citizen, a process expedited for those serving in the military, but had not submitted it, Guerra said.

Guerra and Rubio met at the movies when she was 16 and he was 14. He was fascinated by computers and video games. He built his own computers and dreamed of programming his own video games.

"He was one of those who would figure it out himself," Guerra said. "He would stay there until he figured it out."

Rubio and Guerra dated through high school and Rubio went on to feed his passion for computers at South Texas College. He already knew he wanted to enlist in the Army, but wanted a degree to improve his chances for advancement, Edgar Rubio said.

Guerra and Rubio married after basic training. Nikolai Cyrus Rubio was born while Rubio was stationed at Fort Stewart, just months before his deployment to Iraq.

When Rubio returned for a visit in January, Guerra said “he came back a totally different person - more quiet, serious.”

Rubio was frustrated that Nikolai was slow to warm up to him. But after he was home for a few days Rubio seemed to relax more. He spent time with his son, played video games and watched movies.

Edgar Rubio was amazed that his brother was more aware of new movies and technology than he was even after being in Iraq. The last movie they watched together was Will Ferrell’s spoof on figure skating, “Blades of Glory.” They laughed and laughed, Edgar Rubio said.

Of his siblings, Rubio felt the strongest about giving back to his adopted country. His family had moved from Reynosa, Mexico when he was 4, but he realized what his life would have been like if they had stayed in Mexico, Edgar Rubio said.

Rubio’s sacrifice inspired his brother Edgar. At age 32 he has gone back to school to earn a college degree and will begin the citizenship process this year so he can set a good example for his nephew.

“My brother gave his life for this country,” Edgar Rubio said. “He felt appreciation for this country.”

AFGHANISTAN WAR REPORTS

How Army Officials Helped War Profiteer Get “Hundreds Of Millions Of Dollars” Selling Useless Munitions To The U.S. Army”

“The Company Has Provided Ammunition That Is More Than 40

**Years Old And In Decomposing
Packaging:
Guess What: “The Army Planned To
Continue Accepting Ammunition It
Had Already Ordered From AEY”
“This Is What They Give Us For The
Fighting. It Makes Us Worried, Because
Too Much Of It Is Junk”
“A Lot Of Us Are Asking The Question,” Said
A Senior State Department Official. “How Did
This Guy Get All This Business?”**



AGED ARSENAL: Lt. Col. Amanuddin surveyed 42-year-old Chinese ammunition from AEY that arrived in crumbling boxes at his Afghan police post. Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

Army contracting officials, under pressure to arm Afghan troops, allowed an immature company to enter the murky world of international arms dealing on the Pentagon’s behalf — and did so with minimal vetting and through a vaguely written contract with few restrictions.

March 27, 2008 By C. J. CHIVERS, The New York Times [Excerpts] This article was reported by C. J. Chivers, Eric Schmitt and Nicholas Wood and written by Mr. Chivers.

Since 2006, when the insurgency in Afghanistan sharply intensified, the Afghan government has been dependent on American logistics and military support in the war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

But to arm the Afghan forces that it hopes will lead this fight, the American military has relied since early last year on a fledgling company led by a 22-year-old man whose vice president was a licensed masseur.

With the award last January of a federal contract worth as much as nearly \$300 million, the company, AEY Inc., which operates out of an unmarked office in Miami Beach, became the main supplier of munitions to Afghanistan's army and police forces.

Since then, the company has provided ammunition that is more than 40 years old and in decomposing packaging, according to an examination of the munitions by The New York Times and interviews with American and Afghan officials.

Much of the ammunition comes from the aging stockpiles of the old Communist bloc, including stockpiles that the State Department and NATO have determined to be unreliable and obsolete, and have spent millions of dollars to have destroyed.

In purchasing munitions, the contractor has also worked with middlemen and a shell company on a federal list of entities suspected of illegal arms trafficking.

The company's president, Efraim E. Diveroli, was also secretly recorded in a conversation that suggested corruption in his company's purchase of more than 100 million aging rounds in Albania, according to audio files of the conversation.

This week, after repeated inquiries about AEY's performance by The Times, the Army suspended the company from any future federal contracting, citing shipments of Chinese ammunition and claiming that Mr. Diveroli misled the Army by saying the munitions were Hungarian.

But problems with the ammunition were evident last fall in places like Nawa, Afghanistan, an outpost near the Pakistani border, where an Afghan lieutenant colonel surveyed the rifle cartridges on his police station's dirty floor. Soon after arriving there, the cardboard boxes had split open and their contents spilled out, revealing ammunition manufactured in China in 1966.

"This is what they give us for the fighting," said the colonel, Amanuddin, who like many Afghans has only one name. "It makes us worried, because too much of it is junk."

Ammunition as it ages over decades often becomes less powerful, reliable and accurate.

AEY is one of many previously unknown defense companies to have thrived since 2003, when the Pentagon began dispensing billions of dollars to train and equip indigenous forces in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Its rise from obscurity once seemed to make it a successful example of the Bush administration's promotion of private contractors as integral elements of war-fighting strategy.

But an examination of AEY's background, through interviews in several countries, reviews of confidential government documents and the examination of some of the ammunition, suggests that Army contracting officials, under pressure to arm Afghan troops, allowed an immature company to enter the murky world of international arms dealing on the Pentagon's behalf — and did so with minimal vetting and through a vaguely written contract with few restrictions.

In addition to this week's suspension, AEY is under investigation by the Department of Defense's inspector general and by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, prompted by complaints about the quality and origins of ammunition it provided, and allegations of corruption.

Mr. Diveroli, in a brief telephone interview late last year, denied any wrongdoing. "I know that my company does everything 100 percent on the up and up, and that's all I'm concerned about," he said.

He also suggested that his activities should be shielded from public view. "AEY is working on a moderately classified Department of Defense project," he said. "I really don't want to talk about the details."

As part of the suspension, neither Mr. Diveroli nor his company can bid on any further federal work until the Army's allegations are resolved.

But he will be allowed to provide ammunition already on order under the Afghan contract, according to internal military correspondence.

In January, American officers in Kabul, concerned about munitions from AEY, had contacted the Army's Rock Island Arsenal, in Illinois, and raised the possibility of terminating the contract.

And officials at the Army Sustainment Command, the contracting authority at the arsenal, after meeting with AEY in late February, said they were tightening the packaging standards for munitions shipped to the war.

And yet after that meeting, AEY sent another shipment of nearly one million cartridges to Afghanistan that the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan regarded as substandard.

Lt. Col. David G. Johnson, the command spokesman, said that while there were no reports of ammunition misfiring, some of it was in such poor condition that the military had decided not to issue it.

"Our honest answer is that the ammunition is of a quality that is less than desirable; the munitions do not appear to meet the standards that many of us are used to," Colonel Johnson said. "We are not pleased with the way it was delivered."

Public records show that AEY's contracts since 2004 have potentially been worth more than a third of a billion dollars. Mr. Diveroli set the value higher: he claimed to do \$200 million in business each year.

Several military officers and government officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the investigations, questioned how Mr. Diveroli, and a small group of men principally in their 20s and without extensive military or procurement experiences, landed so much vital government work.

“A lot of us are asking the question,” said a senior State Department official. “How did this guy get all this business?”

The intensity of the Afghan insurgency alarmed the Pentagon in 2006, and the American unit that trains and equips Afghan forces placed a huge munitions order through an Army logistics command.

The order sought 52 types of ammunition: rifle, pistol and machine-gun cartridges, hand grenades, rockets, shotgun slugs, mortar rounds, tank ammunition and more. In all, it covered hundreds of millions of rounds. Afghan forces primarily use weapons developed in the Soviet Union. This meant that most munitions on the list could be bought only overseas.

AEY was one of 10 companies to bid by the September 2006 deadline.

Michael Diveroli, Efraim’s father, had incorporated the company in 1999, when Efraim was 13. For several years, a period when the company appeared to have limited activity, Michael Diveroli, who now operates a police supply company down the street from AEY’s office, was listed as the company’s sole executive.

In 2004, AEY listed Efraim Diveroli, then 18, as an officer with a 1 percent ownership stake.

Mr. Diveroli cut off an interview when asked about Botach Tactical. Mr. Botach, reached by telephone, said that both Michael and Efraim Diveroli had briefly worked for him, but that after seeing the rush of federal contracts available after the wars began, they had struck out on their own.

“They just left me and took my customer base with them,” he said. “They basically said: ‘Why should we work for Botach? Let’s do it on our own.’ “

As Efraim Diveroli arrived in Miami Beach, AEY was transforming itself by aggressively seeking security-related contracts.

It won a \$126,000 award for ammunition for the Special Forces; AEY also provided ammunition or equipment in 2004 to the Department of Energy, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Transportation Security Administration and the State Department.

By 2005, when Mr. Diveroli became AEY’s president at age 19, the company was bidding across a spectrum of government agencies and providing paramilitary equipment — weapons, helmets, ballistic vests, bomb suits, batteries and chargers for X-ray machines — for American aid to Pakistan, Bolivia and elsewhere.

It was also providing supplies to the American military in Iraq, where its business included a \$5.7 million contract for rifles for Iraqi forces.

Two federal officials involved in contracting in Baghdad said AEY quickly developed a bad reputation.

“They weren’t reliable, or if they did come through, they did after many excuses,” said one of them, who asked that his name be withheld because he was not authorized to speak with reporters.

By this time, pressures were emerging in Efraim Diveroli’s life.

In November 2005, a young woman sought an order of protection from him in the domestic violence division of Dade County Circuit Court.

The woman eventually did not appear in court, and her allegations were never ruled on. But in court papers, the woman said that after her relationship with Mr. Diveroli ended, he stalked her and left threatening messages.

Once, according to the file, his behavior included “shoving her to the ground and refusing to allow her to leave during a verbal dispute.” Other times, she reported, Mr. Diveroli arrived at her home unannounced and intoxicated “going about the exterior, banging on windows and doors.”

The woman worried that she could not ignore him, court records said, because his behavior frightened her.

Mr. Diveroli sought court delays on national security grounds. “I am the President and only official employee of my business,” he wrote to the judge on Dec. 8, 2005.

“My business is currently of great importance to the country as I am licensed Defense Contractor to the United States Government in the fight against terrorism in Iraq and I am doing my very best to provide our troops with all their equipment needs on pending critical contracts.”

As AEY’s bid for its largest government contract was being considered, Mr. Diveroli’s personal difficulties continued. On Nov. 26, 2006, the Miami Beach police were called to his condominium during an argument between him and another girlfriend. According to the police report, he had thrown her “clothes out in the hallway and told her to get out.”

A witness told the police Mr. Diveroli had dragged her back into the apartment. The police found the woman crying; she said she had not been dragged. Mr. Diveroli was not charged.

On Dec. 21, 2006, the police were called back to the condominium. Mr. Diveroli and AEY’s vice president, David M. Packouz, had just been in a fight with the valet parking attendant.

The fight began, the police said, after the attendant refused to give Mr. Diveroli his keys and Mr. Diveroli entered the garage to get them himself. A witness said Mr. Diveroli and Mr. Packouz both beat the man; police photographs showed bruises and scrapes on his face and back.

When the police searched Mr. Diveroli, they found he had a forged driver's license that added four years to his age and made him appear old enough to buy alcohol as a minor. His birthday had been the day before.

"I don't even need that any more," he told the police, the report said. "I'm 21 years old."

Mr. Diveroli was charged with simple battery, a misdemeanor, and felony possession of a stolen or forged document.

The second charge placed his business in jeopardy. Mr. Diveroli had a federal firearms license, which was required for his work. With a felony conviction, the license would be nullified.

(Mr. Packouz was charged with battery and the charge was later dropped; he declined to be interviewed. To avoid a conviction on his record, Mr. Diveroli entered a six-month diversion program for first offenders in May 2007 that spared him from standing trial.)

A relative paid Mr. Diveroli's \$1,000 bail as his bid for the Afghan contract was in its final review.

To be accepted, the company had to be, in Army parlance, "a responsible contractor," which required an examination of its financial soundness, transport capabilities, past performance and compliance with the law and government contracting regulations.

The week after a relative paid his bail, the Banc of America Investment Services in Miami provided Mr. Diveroli a letter certifying that his company had cash on hand to begin buying munitions on a large scale. It said AEY had \$5,469,668.95 in an account.

AEY was awarded the contract in January 2007.

Asked why it chose AEY, the Army Sustainment Command answered in writing: "AEY's proposal represented the best value to the government."

Both the Army and AEY have treated the sources of the ammunition the company purchases as confidential matters, declining to say how and where the company obtained it, the prices paid or the quantities delivered.

But records provided by an official concerned about the company's performance, a whistle-blower in the Balkans and an arms-trafficking researcher in Europe, as well as interviews with several people who work in state arsenals in Europe, show that AEY shopped from stocks in the old Eastern bloc, including Albania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Montenegro, Romania and Slovakia.

These stockpiles range from temperature-controlled bunkers to unheated warehouses packed with exposed, decaying ammunition. Some arsenals contain ammunition regarded in munitions circles as high quality. Others are scrap heaps of abandoned Soviet arms.

The Army's contract did little to distinguish between the two.

When the United States or NATO buys munitions for themselves, the process is regulated by quality-assurance standards that cover manufacturing, packaging, storage, testing and transport.

The standards exist in part because munitions are perishable. As they age, propellants and explosives degrade, and casings are susceptible to weathering. Environmental conditions — humidity, vibration, temperature shifts — accelerate decay, making munitions less reliable.

NATO rules require ammunition to be tested methodically over its life; samples are fired through braced weapons, and muzzle velocities and accuracy are recorded.

For rifle cartridges, testing begins at age 10 years, according to Peter Courtney-Green, chief of the Ammunition Support Office of NATO's Maintenance and Supply Agency.

The Soviet Union, which designed the ammunition that AEY bought, developed similar tests, which are still in use.

But when the Army wrote its Afghan contract, it did not enforce either NATO or Russian standards. It told bidders only that the munitions must be “serviceable and issuable to all units without qualification.”

What this meant was not defined.

An official at the Army Sustainment Command said that because the ammunition was for foreign weapons, and considered “nonstandard,” it only had to fit in weapons it was intended for.

“There is no specific testing request, and there is no age limit,” said Michael Hutchison, the command's deputy director for acquisition. “As the ammunition is not standard to the U.S. inventory, the Army doesn't possess packaging or quality standards for that ammo.”

When purchasing such munitions, Mr. Hutchison said, the Army Sustainment Command relies on standards from the “customer” — meaning the Army units in Afghanistan. And the customer, he said, did not set age or testing requirements.

With the vague standards in hand, AEY canvassed the field. One stop was Albania, a fortress state during Soviet times now trying to join NATO. Albania has huge stocks of armaments, much if it provided by China in the 1960s and 1970s.

The quality of these stockpiles vary widely, said William D. G. Hunt, a retired British ammunition technical officer who assessed the entire stock for Albania's Ministry of Defense from 1998 to 2002.

He said a military planning to use the munitions had reason to worry: at least 90 percent of the stockpile was more than 40 years old.

“If there was any procurement made for combat purposes from that stockpile, I would be very dubious about it,” he said. “I am not suggesting that all the ammunition would fail. But its performance would tail off rather dramatically. It is substandard, for sure.”

Problems with Albania's decaying munitions were apparent earlier this month, when a depot outside Tirana, Albania's capital, erupted in a chain of explosions, killing at least 22 people, injuring at least 300 others and destroying hundreds of homes.

Before the Army's contractors began shopping from such depots, the West's assessment of Albanian munitions was evident in programs it sponsored to destroy them. Through 2007, the United States had contributed \$2 million to destroy excess small-caliber weapons and 2,000 tons of ammunition in Albania, according to the State Department.

A NATO program that ended last year involved 16 Western nations contributing about \$10 million to destroy 8,700 tons of obsolete ammunition. The United States contributed \$500,000.

Among the items destroyed were 104 million 7.62 millimeter cartridges — exactly the ammunition AEY sought from the Albanian state arms export agency.

Albania offered to sell tens of millions of cartridges manufactured as long ago as 1950. For tests, a 25-year-old AEY representative was given 1,000 cartridges to fire, according to Ylli Pinari, the director of the arms export agency at the time of the sale.

No ballistic performance was recorded, he said. The rounds were fired by hand.

On that basis, AEY bought more than 100 million cartridges for the Pentagon's order. The cartridges, according to packing lists, dated to the 1960s.

The company also hired a local businessman, Kosta Trebicka, to remove the ammunition from its wooden crates and hermetically sealed metal boxes — the standard military packaging that protects munitions from moisture and dirt, and helps ensure its reliability and ease of transport in the field.

Mr. Trebicka, in interviews, said Mr. Diveroli wanted to discard the crates and metal boxes to reduce the weight and cost of air shipments and maximize profits. Several American officials said they suspected that the packaging was removed because it bore Chinese markings and the ammunition's age.

The Czech Connection

As the cartridges in Albania were being prepared for shipment to Afghanistan, Mr. Diveroli began seeking ammunition from the Czech Republic to fill an order for Iraq's Interior Ministry.

In May 2007, according to two American officials, the Czech government contacted the American Embassy in Prague with a concern: AEY was buying nine million cartridges through Petr Bernatik, a Czech citizen who had been accused by Czech officials of illegal arms trafficking.

The accusations included shipments of rocket-propelled grenades in violation of an international embargo to Congo, and illegal shipments of firearms to Slovakia.

Mr. Bernatik had publicly denied both accusations. But they were deemed credible enough in Washington that he was listed on the Defense Trade Controls watch list, according to one of the American officials.

This list, maintained by the State Department, is used to prevent American dealers from engaging suspicious traders in their business, in part to prevent legal arms companies from enriching or legitimizing black-market networks.

AEY has never been implicated in black-market sales. But the Czech government, which had discretion over the sale, asked the American Embassy if it wanted Mr. Bernatik involved in AEY's deals, according to the two American officials, who requested anonymity because they were not authorized to share the contents of diplomatic discussions.

The United States did not try to block the transaction, one of the American officials said, in part because equipping Iraq was in the United States' interest, and also because Mr. Bernatik had been accused, not convicted.

On May 7, 2007, the Czech government issued an export license. Mr. Bernatik, in a telephone interview, said he arranged seven flights to Iraq for AEY last year. "We have a normal business collaboration," he said.

As Mr. Diveroli began to fill the Army's huge orders, he was entering a shadowy world, and in his brief interview he suggested that he was aware that corruption could intrude on his dealings in Albania. "What goes on in the Albanian Ministry of Defense?" he said. "Who's clean? Who's dirty? Don't want to know about it."

The way AEY's business was structured, Mr. Diveroli, at least officially, did not deal directly with Albanian officials. Instead, a middleman company registered in Cyprus, Evdin Ltd., bought the ammunition and sold it to his company.

The local packager involved in the deal, Mr. Trebicka, said that he suspected that Evdin's purpose was to divert money to Albanian officials.

The purchases, Mr. Trebicka said, were a flip: Albania sold ammunition to Evdin for \$22 per 1,000 rounds, he said, and Evdin sold it to AEY for much more. The difference, he said he suspected, was shared with Albanian officials, including Mr. Pinari, then the head of the arms export agency, and the defense minister at the time, Fatmir Mediu.

(Mr. Mediu resigned last week after the ammunition depot explosions; Mr. Pinari was arrested.) The Albanian government has been infuriated by Mr. Trebicka's allegations. Sali Berisha, the prime minister, Mr. Mediu and Mr. Pinari all denied involvement in kickbacks. But Mr. Trebicka said that after he raised his concerns about Evdin with the Defense Ministry, his company was forced from the repackaging contract.

On June 11, 2007, Mr. Trebicka and Mr. Diveroli commiserated by phone about problems with doing business in Albania. Mr. Trebicka surreptitiously recorded the conversation, and later gave the audio files to American investigators.

The conversation, he said, showed that the American company was aware of corruption in its dealings in Albania and that Heinrich Thomet, a Swiss arms dealer, was behind Evdin.

In the recordings, which Mr. Trebicka shared with The Times, Mr. Diveroli suggests that Mr. Thomet, called “Henri,” was acting as the middleman.

“Pinari needs a guy like Henri in the middle to take care of him and his buddies, which is none of my business,” Mr. Diveroli said. “I don’t want to know about that business. I want to know about legitimate businesses.”

Mr. Diveroli recommended that Mr. Trebicka try to reclaim his contract by sending “one of his girls” to have sex with Mr. Pinari. He suggested that money might help, too.

“Let’s get him happy; maybe he gives you one more chance,” he said. “If he gets \$20,000 from you ... “

At the end, Mr. Diveroli appeared to lament his business with Albania. “It went up higher to the prime minister and his son,” he said. “I can’t fight this mafia. It got too big. The animals just got too out of control.”

In e-mail exchanges, Mr. Thomet denied an official role in Evdin. His involvement in the Albania deal, he said, had been in introducing Mr. Diveroli to potential partners and officials. Bogdan Choopryna, Evdin’s general manager, also said Mr. Diveroli’s allegations were not true. “We listen to the words of Mr. Diveroli, and then I am responsible for what he is saying?” he said. In addition to being an official with Evdin, Mr. Choopryna, 27, markets products for a Swiss company run by Mr. Thomet.

The dispute about Evdin’s role and who owns it remains publicly unresolved. Evdin had incorporated on Sept. 26, 2006 — the week after Mr. Diveroli bid on the Afghan contract, according to Cyprus’s registrar. The company listed its office in Larnaca, Cyprus, and its general director as Pambos Fellas.

A visit by a reporter to the address found an accounting business above a nightclub. Evdin had no office or staff there. And Mr. Fellas, who was inside, said that he was not Evdin’s general director, but “a nominee director” whose sole role was to register the company.

He had registered hundreds of such companies for a fee, he said, and knew nothing of Evdin’s business.

Some signs point back to Switzerland. Mr. Pinari initially told two reporters that he worked with Evdin via Mr. Thomet. (After a reporter told Mr. Thomet this, Mr. Pinari changed his story, referring the reporter to Mr. Fellas and Evdin’s office in Cyprus.) Mr. Diveroli also said the Cyprus company was run by a “Swiss individual.”

Mr. Thomet has been accused in the past by private groups, including Amnesty International, of arranging illegal arms transfers under a shifting portfolio of corporate names. His activities have also caused concern in Washington, where, like Mr. Bernatik, he and Evdin are on the Defense Trade Controls watch list, an American official said.

Mr. Thomet said past claims that he had engaged in illegal arms trading were caused by “false statements by former competitors.”

Hugh Griffiths, operations manager of the Arms Transfer Profile Initiative, a private organization that researches illicit arms transfers, described Mr. Thomet as a broker with contacts in former Eastern bloc countries with stockpiles and arms factories. His proximity to AEY’s purchases, Mr. Griffiths said, raised questions about whether the Pentagon was adequately vetting the business done in its name.

“Put very simply, many of the people involved in smuggling arms to Africa are also exactly the same as those involved in Pentagon-supported deals, like AEY’s shipments to Afghanistan and Iraq,” he said.

Under the suspension ordered Wednesday, the Army planned to continue accepting ammunition it had already ordered from AEY.

As of March 21, it had ordered \$155 million of munitions, according to the Army Sustainment Command.

In Afghanistan, American munitions officers are examining all of the small-arms ammunition AEY has shipped. The final shipment, which arrived in wooden crates, included loose and corroded cartridges, according to three officers.

TROOP NEWS

German Army Bans Blood Sausage Made From Human Blood

March 24, 2008 Army Times

The German army is making news in two areas that could be, but are not necessarily, related.

One report cites a study that says German soldiers are too fat, with 40 percent of them overweight, and also smoke too much and don’t exercise enough.

“The public perception is that soldiers are slim, sporty and healthy. Unfortunately, the reality is very different,” said Germany’s army commissioner, Reinhold Robbe, according to the Reuters news agency.

The other report concerns a fatty meat that may be one contributor to the soldiers’ weight issues — the German specialty bludwurst, or blood sausage. The news

magazine Focus says two German army cooks, both sergeants, were suspended in December for making bludwurst using their own blood.

Officials were tipped off by a third soldier who had been asked to donate blood for the culinary cause.

The cooks were relieved of duty because nobody trusted their cooking after word got out. They could face criminal charges.

IRAQ RESISTANCE ROUNDUP

“Iraqi People Are Killed By The Hands Of Maliki”



A demonstrator displays a placard during a protest march in Basra March 30, 2008. Residents took to the streets of Basra demanding a halt to military operations against the Mehdi Army. The placard reads “Iraqi people are killed by the hands of Maliki”. REUTERS/Atef Hassan

Resistance Action

April 1 (Reuters) & April 2 (Reuters)

A roadside bomb exploded near a convoy carrying Iraqi generals in the southern city of Basra, but the officials were unhurt, one of the officers said. Major-General Mohammed al-Askari, spokesman for Iraq's Defence Ministry, said he was in a convoy with Basra's security chief, Lieutenant-General Mohan al-Firaiji, when the blast went off in the Hayaniya neighbourhood.

The neighborhood is a stronghold of the Mehdi Army and was the scene of major clashes last week between security forces and militiamen.

An Iraqi television correspondent was wounded in the leg, Askari said, adding that he might have been hit by a bullet.

A roadside bomb wounded two policemen, in Karrada district in central Baghdad, police said.

A roadside bomb targeting a police patrol wounded four policemen in central Mosul, police said.

A car bomb wounded three policeman in eastern Mosul, police said.

Guerrillas killed two off-duty policemen and a civilian when they opened fire on their car in the town of al-Baaj, about 100 km (60 miles) west of Mosul, said the town's mayor, Abdul Rahman al-Shimari.

A roadside bomb exploded at a police checkpoint in the Qahira neighbourhood in northern Baghdad, wounding three policemen, police said.

The U.S. military said eight members of a U.S.-backed neighbourhood police patrol were killed and three wounded on Tuesday while they were moving a bomb they had found in Shirqat town, 300 km (190 miles) north of Baghdad. Police said five members of the patrol were killed. The patrol was taking the bomb away for detonation when it exploded. A car bomber killed one patrol member in an attack on another checkpoint.

Mehdi army fighters burned an Iraqi armoured vehicle during fresh clashes in Basra on Wednesday, a fighter from the Mehdi army said. The Basra joint operations center announced that a gun battle broke out during a raid and an Iraqi army vehicle was set on fire.

**IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE RESISTANCE
END THE OCCUPATION**

OCCUPATION REPORT

Good News For The Iraqi Resistance!!

U.S. Occupation Commands' Stupid Terror Tactics Recruit Even More Fighters To Kill U.S. Troops



A foreign occupation soldier from the U. S. Army searches the body of an Iraqi citizen in Mosul March 31, 2008. (AP Photo/Maya Alleruzzo)

[Fair is fair. Let's bring 150,000 Iraqi troops over here to the USA. They can kill people at checkpoints, bust into their houses with force and violence, butcher their families, overthrow the government, put a new one in office they like better and call it "sovereign," and "detain" anybody who doesn't like it in some prison without any charges being filed against them, or any trial.]

[Those Iraqis are sure a bunch of backward primitives. They actually resent this help, have the absurd notion that it's bad their country is occupied by a foreign military dictatorship, and consider it their patriotic duty to fight and kill the soldiers sent to grab their country. What a bunch of silly people. How fortunate they are to live under a military dictatorship run by George Bush. Why, how could anybody not love that? You'd want that in your home town, right?]

**OCCUPATION ISN'T LIBERATION
BRING ALL THE TROOPS HOME NOW!**

DANGER: POLITICIANS AT WORK



[Thanks to SSG N (ret'd) who sent this in.]

Bush Says Defeating Himself Is Top Priority

"The terrorist threat is real, and defeating the enemy is the top priority." -- President George W. Bush, AFP News Service, Apr 2, 2008

**NEED SOME TRUTH?
CHECK OUT THE NEW TRAVELING
SOLDIER**

Telling the truth - about the occupation or the criminals running the government in Washington - is the first reason for Traveling Soldier. But we want to do more than tell the truth; we want to report on the resistance - whether it's in the streets of Baghdad, New York, or inside the armed forces.

Our goal is for Traveling Soldier to become the thread that ties working-class people inside the armed services together. We want this newsletter to be a weapon to help you organize resistance within the armed forces.

If you like what you've read, we hope that you'll join with us in building a network of active duty organizers. <http://www.traveling-soldier.org/>

And join with Iraq War vets in the call to end the occupation and bring our troops home now! (www.ivaw.org/)

CLASS WAR REPORTS



Troops Invited:

What do you think? Comments from service men and women, and veterans, are especially welcome. Write to Box 126, 2576 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10025-5657 or send email contact@militaryproject.org: Name, I.D., withheld unless you request publication. Replies confidential. Same address to unsubscribe. Phone: 917.677.8057

DO YOU HAVE A FRIEND OR RELATIVE IN THE SERVICE?

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