

Trump pardons of Blackwater mercenaries an ‘insult to justice’

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Lawyers and rights defenders say Trump pardons of four war criminals undoes years-long fight for justice.

Washington, December 26 (RHC)-- It took a drawn-out and complicated legal process for four employees of a private United States security firm to be convicted in the September 2007 killings of 14 Iraqi citizens in Baghdad's Nisour Square.

U.S. prosecutors said the heavily armed Blackwater contractors used sniper weapons, machine guns and grenade launchers to indiscriminately fire at civilians in the crowded traffic circle, causing massive carnage and the killing of two children.

But in an instant, Donald Trump undid those measures when he pardoned Nicholas Slatten, Paul Alvin Slough, Evan Shawn Liberty and Dustin Laurent Heard earlier this week, in a move described by lawyers and human rights defenders as a miscarriage of justice.

"This pardon is an insult to justice and an insult to the victims who waited so many years to see some measure of justice," Sarah Holewinski, Washington director at Human Rights Watch, told Al Jazeera.

After the years-long legal process that included re-trials, Slatten was sentenced in 2019 to life in prison without parole for the murder of Ahmed Haithem Ahmed al-Rubia'y, a 19-year-old medical student who was driving his mother to an appointment when he was killed.

The three other Blackwater contractors were convicted of voluntary manslaughter, attempted manslaughter and other charges in a 2014 trial. After an appeal and resentencing, they were each given between 12- and 15-year prison terms.

The killings, which took place as the Blackwater employees escorted a U.S. convoy of vehicles in the Iraqi capital, prompted an international outcry and raised questions about the ethics of using private security contractors in U.S. wars abroad.

Holewinski said two boys below age 12 were among the victims in Nisour Square that day. "When the US Justice Department prosecuted these men, we saw the rule of law at work. Now Trump's contempt for the rule of law is on full display," she said.

Lawyers representing the victims say more than 30 people travelled from Iraq to the US to testify in the criminal proceedings against the Blackwater contractors. They recounted the horrors that took place that day 13 years ago, when 17 Iraqis were killed and at least 30 people were injured in what they called a massacre. The FBI charged the men with 14 deaths that they determined violated the use of deadly force. In court, the contractors' defense teams argued the men opened fire after being ambushed by armed fighters.

Blackwater, now renamed Academi, was founded by Erik Prince, a staunch Trump ally and the brother of Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. It was one of several private military firms hired to assist the US army in Iraq following its 2003 invasion and occupation of the country.

Citing an internal Department of Defense census, the Brookings Institution said almost 160,000 US private contractors were employed by numerous firms operating in Iraq in 2007 – nearly as many as the total number of U.S. soldiers stationed there at the time.

Trump's Blackwater decision is part of a string of pardons of allies and loyalists issued during his final weeks in office. In the past week, he has pardoned nearly 50 people.

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