

Mercenaries, Misfits



With the American firm Blackwater in the dock, suspicions abound over the whole area of private security in modern conflict. In particular, there is concern about unsatisfactory contracting out of coalition operations in Iraq. But the September dramas on the Baghdad streets involving private security companies produced unreasonable reaction as well as sensible concern. The term mercenary has been deployed loosely as an insult rather than an objective description of a paid foreign military auxiliary; and those working for security companies have been dismissed generically as a bunch of opportunistic misfits looking for trouble and an adrenalin surge.

aS FAR AS PRIVATE SECURITY companies are concerned, misunderstood is probably a better description than either mercenary or misfit. Aspects of security have been privatised for many years; it is not a new concept. For decades, commercial companies have been employed to guard buildings and institutions, where the expensive skills of highly trained soldiers were more cost effective elsewhere. Security organisations have also been contracted as independent think tanks to assess risk and recommend measures to counter threats.

As for mercenaries, they have been a respectable part of the British Army since 1815 when Gurkhas were first enrolled. Indeed, recruiting Nepalese to serve British national and military interests is a far truer model of mercenary service than, say, employing a company largely of former British soldiers to guard and escort Foreign Office personnel in Baghdad and Basra. Yet few people describe the Gurkhas – or indeed the Fijians and other