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U.S. Workers, Lured by Money and Idealism, Face Iraqi Reality

By ANDREW JACOBS and SIMON ROMERO

They were driven by the promise of six-figure salaries or a powerful sense of patriotism. For others, the decision to sign up for a job in the cauldron of Iraq was motivated by desire to help ordinary Iraqis improve their lives. Among the tens of thousands of American citizens working in Iraq, few could have imagined how dangerous their jobs would become.

But in the last two weeks, many of the simplest tasks have carried extraordinary danger, as civilian workers have become targets of kidnappings and murder. Yesterday, there were reports that bodies were found mutilated in a shallow grave but the findings could not be confirmed. The news came just days after seven civilians working for the Halliburton Company of Houston and two soldiers disappeared in an ambush near that site last Friday.

Wendy Hall, a spokeswoman for Halliburton, said the company had been notified of the bodies' discovery, but she said she could not confirm that they were those of missing employees. "Our workers in Iraq are courageous volunteers in service to their country and their loved ones," Ms. Hall said in a statement last night.

There are no concrete figures on the number of civilians who have been killed or wounded in Iraq, but Halliburton has acknowledged that 30 of its employees and contractors have died since the war began last year. Several workers from the United States and other countries were still missing last night — like Thomas Hamill, a former dairy farmer who worked for Halliburton as a fuel truck driver and was captured last week on a highway outside Baghdad.

In interviews yesterday, several civilian workers who have spent time in Iraq said the experiences they routinely faced had grown more harrowing. Whether employed as truck drivers, ferrying food and supplies, or as engineers, repairing roads and bridges, they are aware that the risks may in some ways now outweigh the lucrative salaries or jobs they accepted to help send children to college or to build a first home for their families.

"We get attacked day and night," said Lee Medina, a technician from North Carolina who repairs warfare equipment for the military. "All you can do is find a safe place to sit out the attack."

The increasing chaos has surprised those accustomed to overseas reconstruction and development projects. "We've worked in some difficult environments but this has been extreme," said Robert Band, the president of Perini Corporation, whose employees have been helping to restore Iraq's electric grid.

For the companies back home, the costs of doing business in Iraq are climbing, too, potentially driving up the expense of reconstruction there. For instance, policies for accidental death and dismemberment coverage have risen more than 30 percent in recent days, according to insurance executives specializing in providing coverage to companies that have employees in Iraq.

"It's the reality of the situation," said Peter Schulteis, executive vice president of Global Underwriters in Cincinnati, a company that advises insurers on providing coverage for operations in Iraq. "There's the perception that the risks have just gone up."

Employers are required by law to provide insurance to all employees in war zones, under the Defense Base Act, but such coverage is usually limited to \$4,000 a month in the event of death or disability. Policies for additional coverage often needed to attract workers to Iraq, with potential payments ranging from \$250,000 to more than \$1 million, have been rising in price.

Still, some companies have not slowed their efforts to send additional people to Iraq. Halliburton said it was continuing to dispatch hundreds of employees to Iraq and Kuwait this week.

Aerotek Inc., a recruiting company based in Baltimore, said there had been a spike in people seeking jobs in Iraq. Todd Gardner, the director of marketing, said it was seeking to fill hundreds of positions, including 350 mechanics and 150 warehouse workers, some of which pay as much as \$100,000 a year. Engineers can make upward of \$350,000, he said. People have obviously weighed the danger and they still want to go, he said.

Other companies, like the Titan Corporation of San Diego, which provides translation services for the Army and has lost 13 staff employees and contractors in Iraq in the last year, are not commenting on their plans, citing concerns that their employees could be singled out for violent attacks as a result.

Stan Soloway, president of Professional Services Council, a trade group that represents dozens of companies doing business in Iraq, told the story of one company forced to move 30 employees out of rented houses after threatening notes were placed under their doors. "They had 30 one-year leases and now all of a sudden they have to have 60 one-year leases," he said.

Many workers have begun adopting protective measures and defensive maneuvers to try to get their jobs done. Larry Plummer eats military rations and often wraps himself in full-body armor to rest in the back of his G.M.C. Yukon. An engineer from suburban St. Louis and the father of eight, he has grown accustomed to dodging mortar fire, roadside explosives and stone-throwing children.

A contractor from Texas, Alton Braudaway, dashes madly between the refineries and oil fields of southern Iraq trying to restore oil production alongside the daily threat of sabotage. And although Mr. Medina sleeps and works on a heavily guarded military base north of Baghdad, his slumber is often broken by the sound of incoming ordnance.

Mr. Medina said that despite the constant shelling and the long absences from his family, he was devoted to helping the military carry out its mission. "I'm happy to do my part," he said, speaking from the top of a concrete bunker at the Balad Air Force Base northwest of Baghdad.

For Mr. Braudaway, 53, whose team has already helped restore Iraqi oil production to 1.8 million barrels a day, altruism is largely what keeps him going. "It's a wonderful feeling to say you helped a country rebuild itself," he said. Most of the Iraqis he meets in and around Basra still welcome his presence, he said, but if things change, he said he would not hesitate to leave. "When that warm and fuzzy feeling is gone, you pack it up and go home," he said.

Mr. Plummer is home in St. Louis for a two-week leave, but knows he has to go back to keep earning the solid money he has collected for the last year as a field engineer for Systems Electronics Inc. He said he hoped his \$40,000 base pay and a 30 percent bonus would help put his eight children through college.

Despite the rising violence directed at civilian workers in the last few weeks, there seems to be no shortage of people seeking employment.

Glen Trehern is one of those eager to head overseas. A supervisor at a seafood processing plant in Mississippi, Mr. Trehern, 52, said a Halliburton recruiter had offered him a truck-driving position, although he is still waiting for a firm commitment. "I look at it from a business perspective," he said. "When you're talking a possible \$1,000 a day tax free, it's real attractive."

Although he has a steady job with a \$70,000 salary, Mr. Trehern said he had no retirement savings and viewed this stint as a way to acquire a handsome nest egg. He added that two of his sons, a mechanic and an electrician, were hoping to find jobs in Iraq as well.

Even more evidence of the allure of new jobs could be found at the George Bush Intercontinental Airport on Tuesday. Hector Avila, a naturalized American citizen from Honduras, stood in the ticket line with his family at the KLM counter to board a flight to Amsterdam, from which he would continue to Kuwait and then Iraq to work building Army camps for Halliburton's subsidiary, Kellogg Brown & Root.

"I feel a little bit full of nerves," Mr. Avila, 43, said in Spanish. "I don't want to leave my family but it's something I have to do to make money."

His wife, Mirian, the mother of their five children, said her husband hoped to save enough money to buy a house in Houston with the money he made in Iraq. He had already worked for a year in Iraq and was returning there after a short break. "I told him not to go," she said. "He's getting on the plane anyway he has to go. That's the way it is now."

Maureen Balleza contributed reporting for this article.