

American Defense Contractor Accused of Enslaving U.S. Citizen Linguists

The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Maryland in 2016, was unsealed earlier this month.



Photo Illustration by The Daily Beast

A major American defense contractor held its translators in a tent city under slave-like conditions, breaking U.S. anti-slavery laws, according to allegations in a 2016 federal lawsuit that was recently unsealed. Under threat of arrest in Kuwait, the translators were held in tents where the temperature regularly topped 100 degrees. Company representatives seized their passports and indicated they would go to prison if they tried to escape.

According to the suit, supervisors weren't coy about coercing the translators. One plaintiff, a linguist named Edward Youkhana, complained about his treatment in Kuwait to a regional manager.

"The linguists are slaves," the manager replied.

Human rights advocates have long lambasted the Gulf states for their widespread practice of trafficking foreign workers and confiscating their passports. But those charges have largely focused on the exploitation of people from developing nations, including India and Nepal. The allegations in this suit, if true, would join the growing evidence that Americans are also vulnerable to slavery—and by companies working for their own government.

This isn't the first lawsuit alleging an American defense contractor treated its employees like slaves; in a [suit unsealed in April](#), six plaintiffs made similar allegations against ManTech.

"These U.S.-citizen linguists are heroes—they go into combat unarmed to help minimize the chaos of the battlefield and gather intelligence," said Joseph Hennessey,

owned by marginalized people were facades, functioning as astroturf to create the false perception that the massive translator contract was helping marginalized people get a leg up in the cutthroat industry of government contracting.

But the suit doesn't just allege that one of America's biggest defense contractors ran a sophisticated sham; it also charges that, as part of this scheme, the company essentially enslaved its employees.

The alleged scheme worked this way: GLS, the DynCorp subcontractor, recruited translators and brought them to Kuwait. When the translators arrived, GLS employees confiscated their passports, claiming it was just to secure the translators work visas. And they assured the translators at the offset of their work that they would handle all the paperwork to get them legal status in Kuwait. But instead of getting them work visas, the company just got them tourist visas—meaning the translators in Kuwait, unbeknownst to them, were working illegally and at risk of arrest.

Once the translators arrived in Kuwait, the promise of good work turned to a nightmare. They were held in dangerous housing, including in tent cities designed for American soldiers to pass a few hours before flying out. These conditions might have been manageable for a few hours. But over months, they grew progressively more hellish. While GLS managers "lived in luxury seaside apartments just outside of Kuwait City," their translators stayed in places like Camp Ali al-Salem—a tent city battered by dust storms and insufficiently air-conditioned for the scorching desert heat. Plaintiffs say they suffered respiratory sickness because of the exposure to the elements.

At another compound, called Camp Buehring, translators were packed into two tents. Plaintiffs had just 10-foot-by-6-foot of personal space, according to the suit, and zero privacy. "The crowded conditions overwhelmed the tent's air-conditioning and the tents were hot," the suit says. "The close-quarter living also encouraged the infestation of rodents and pests, including rats, bed-bugs, lice, and mites."

Predictably, the people living in those conditions got sick. But they couldn't get medical care, according to

a lawyer representing the plaintiffs in both lawsuits. “To have been treated so horrifically is unfathomable.”

The latest suit to surface, which has 29 plaintiffs, was filed in federal court for the district of Maryland in 2016. It was unsealed earlier this month. Its allegations, regarding DynCorp and Global Linguist Solutions (GLS), have not been previously reported. GLS did not respond to requests for comment. A spokesperson for DynCorp vigorously disputed the allegations in the suit.

“DynCorp International has not been served with the complaint,” said spokesperson Mary Lawrence. “Our review of the newly unsealed complaint, however, which is primarily directed at another company known as Global Linguist Solutions, indicate that the allegations are wholly without merit and baseless. The government previously investigated the claims and decided not to participate in the case. DynCorp International has, at all times, complied fully with all applicable laws. Should the complaint be served on DynCorp International, we will vigorously defend against these baseless allegations brought by plaintiffs seeking a payday.”

The suit makes two main allegations: First, that DynCorp—a company based in McLean, Virginia—deceived the government about its work with women- and minority-owned businesses; and second, that it broke a federal anti-slavery law.

The allegations spring from a contract DynCorp signed with U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command (INSCOM) to provide translators for American forces in the Middle East. The American military relies heavily on contract translators, and recruiting skilled linguists to do this work was a lucrative project for DynCorp.

Federal contracting laws also incentivize contractors to subcontract some of their work to businesses owned by women, people of color, and other marginalized groups. The rationale behind that practice is to break the old boys’ club that dominates the lucrative government contracting industry; by subcontracting with companies owned by people excluded from the so-called club, those people develop skills to compete for future contracts—at least, that’s the idea.

In this case, according to the lawsuit, the system didn’t work. Instead, DynCorp used a subsidiary, GLS, to subcontract the work to a host of businesses apparently owned by marginalized people. But those businesses oversaw the translators in name only, according to the suit. While stray documentation indicated the linguists worked for those businesses, GLS recruited and managed the translators; in other words, the businesses

the suit, because U.S. Army medics were barred from treating them unless their illnesses were life-threatening.

A third facility, Camp Arifjan, had exterior walls, unlike the tent cities at Caps Ali al-Salem and Buehring. But it was “prone to flooding,” and inches of toxic sewer water drenched the building, soiling translators’ clothes and bedding. Temperatures inside often topped 100 degrees. The heat and the sewage incubated disease.

“The overcrowded conditions, the flooded conditions, and the heat contributed to rodent-, bedbug-, lice- and mite-infestation, causing contagious skin conditions and disease,” the suit reads. The plaintiffs “experienced deprivation on the battlefield of Iraq; however, nothing compared to the decrepit, overcrowded, open-bay housing of Arifjan.”

But the translators couldn’t leave, because they didn’t have passports, and they couldn’t turn to the Kuwaiti government for help because they would get arrested. In other words, the translators were allegedly held against their will—a flagrant violation of the American ban on human trafficking.

“GLS intentionally placed a number of plaintiffs in situations where GLS knew that they were likely to be arrested,” the suit reads. “GLS did this to make a public example of linguists who strayed off the base and as a means of frightening other linguists to not attempt to leave their bases.”

Ken Tolleson, the president of GLS, appeared to know the power his company had over the translators. When some complained to him about the dangerous living conditions, Tolleson said they “would all be fired and returned to the U.S. to ‘deliver pizzas,’” according to the suit.

The plaintiffs still wanted to leave. But it wasn’t easy. They didn’t have their passports, and when they finally got them, they learned the Kuwaiti government had issued warrants for their arrest because of work they didn’t know was illegal. Some who tried to flee were jailed by Kuwaiti law enforcement. To get out, they had to confess to crimes they hadn’t realized they were committing. And those confessions meant they were barred from Kuwait and other Gulf nations.

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