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Security guards

'machine-gunned Iraqis as they tried to surrender'

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PRIVATE security guards fired machine guns at innocent, surrendering Iraqis and launched a grenade into a girls' school, US prosecutors said yesterday.

Manslaughter charges were announced against five guards with Blackwater Worldwide.

A sixth guard for the US contractor admitted in a plea deal to killing at least one Iraqi in the 2007 shooting in Baghdad's Nisoor Square. Seventeen Iraqis were
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killed.

The five guards surrendered yesterday and were due to ask a federal judge for bail.

"The tragic events in Nisoor Square were shocking and a violation of basic human rights," said the FBI assistant director, Joseph Persichini.

In addition to being charged with 14 counts of manslaughter, the five guards face 20 counts of attempted manslaughter.

The shooting unfolded in the crowded square, where prosecutors say civilians were going about their lives.

The guards tried to shut the intersection after a car bombing elsewhere in the city.

Witnesses said the guards opened fire unprovoked. Women and children were among the victims, and the shooting left the square littered with wrecked cars.

Blackwater, the largest security contractor in Iraq, says its guards were ambushed by insurgents while responding to a car bombing.

Pat Rowan, the national security prosecutor, said: "At least 34 unarmed Iraqi civilians, including women and children, were killed or injured without justification or provocation by these Blackwater security guards."

Paul Cassell, a defence lawyer, said: "We think it's pure and simply a case of self-defence. Tragically, people did die."

Although the case has been assigned to a judge in Washington DC, the accused men want it moved to Utah, the state in which they surrendered. There they have a good chance of finding a conservative jury pool, made up of people more likely to support the Iraq war.

Khalid Ibrahim, a 40-year-old electrician who said his father, Ibrahim Abid, 78, died in the shooting, said: "The killers must pay for their crime against innocent civilians.

"Justice must be achieved so that we can have rest from the agony we are living in.

"We know that the conviction of the people behind the shooting will not bring my father to life, but we will have peace in our minds and hearts."

The accused guards are former marines Donald Ball, from Utah, Dustin Heard, from Tennessee, and Evan Liberty, from New Hampshire; and army veterans Nick Slatten, from Tennessee, and Paul Slough, from Texas.

The guards face the prospect of 30-year mandatory prison terms under the anti-machine gun law passed during the height of the crack cocaine epidemic in the US.

The sixth Blackwater guard was identified as Jeremy Ridgeway, from California.

His sentencing in connection with his plea in the case has not yet been scheduled.

The shooting strained relations between the US and Baghdad. The fledgling Iraqi government wanted Blackwater expelled from the country. It also sought the right to prosecute the men in Iraqi courts.

Defence attorneys accused the US justice department of bowing to Iraqi pressure.

"We are confident that any jury will see this for what it is: a politically motivated prosecution to appease the Iraqi government," said defence attorney Steven McCool, who represents Ball.

Based in Moyock, North Carolina, Blackwater provides heavily armed guards for diplomats.

Since the shooting, the company has been a flashpoint in the debate on how heavily the United States relies on contractors in war zones.

The company was not charged over the deaths.

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