

Suit Accuses Blackwater of War Crimes in Shooting Deaths

WASHINGTON, Oct. 11 (Reuters) — A wounded survivor and relatives of three people killed on Sept. 16 when employees of the private security company Blackwater USA opened fire on Iraqis in Baghdad sued the firm in an American court on Thursday.

The Center for Constitutional Rights, a legal advocacy group, said it filed the suit, which charges that Blackwater and its affiliates violated United States law in committing “extrajudicial killings and war crimes.”

The killing of 17 Iraqis in the Baghdad shooting led to calls for tighter controls on private contractors, who are immune from prosecution in Iraq.

The suit contends that Blackwater “created and fostered a culture of lawlessness amongst its employees, encouraging them

to act in the company’s financial interests at the expense of innocent human life.”

The suit was filed in the names of Talib Mutlaq Deewan, who was wounded, and the estates of Himoud Saed Atban, Usama Fadhil Abbass and Oday Ismail Ibraheem. It seeks unspecified compensatory damages for death and for physical, mental and economic injuries, as well as punitive damages.

Those bringing the suit also want to compel the testimony of Erik Prince, the founder of Blackwater, who told Congress last week that his staff had acted appropriately and had returned fire at threatening targets.

“We look forward to forcing Blackwater and Mr. Prince to tell the world under oath why this attack happened,” said Susan

Burke, a lawyer representing the Iraqis.

The Iraqi government has said the 17 were deliberately killed.

The Associated Press reported that United Nations officials in Baghdad stepped up pressure on the United States on Thursday to prosecute any unjustified killings of Iraqi civilians by private security contractors, saying such killings could amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity if “done in cold blood.”

“For us, it’s a human rights issue,” said Ivana Vuco, a human rights officer with the United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq.

“We will monitor the allegations of killings by security contractors and look into whether or not crimes against humanity and war crimes have been committed,” she said.

