

Tribes Accused of Oil Protection Racket

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Oil company says tribes it contracted to guard pipelines are destroying them up to drum up more business.

The state-owned North Oil Company, NOC, alleges that tribes paid to protect pipelines are behind many of the attacks on them around the Kirkuk oil fields.

The tribes insist, however, that the government is not doing enough to safeguard oil export routes.

Since a contract with a British security firm expired in December, the NOC has been relying on 16 tribes in the Kirkuk area which it has contracted to protect the pipeline network for a monthly fee.

The tribal forces complement the 1,500-strong Oil Pipeline Protection Force which the government set up earlier this year to guard the main northward route from the Kirkuk fields to the Turkish oil terminal of Ceyhan. This big pipeline should be able to carry 800,000 barrels of oil per day, but because of the attacks it is currently averaging an eighth of that volume.

The al-Ubaid, an Arab tribe contracted by NOC, has deployed some 150 to 200 of its men to look after a number of pipelines that pass through seven villages in the area. None has been attacked so far.

Sheikh Abdullah Sami al-Asi of the al-Ubaid says that where attacks occur in other areas around Kirkuk, the fault lies with poor preparation by the authorities.

"The Iraqi army is negligent and irresponsible about fulfilling its duties, and that's because of lack of expertise," al-Asi said.

Jasim al-Agidi, who gets 150,000 dinars a month – around 100 US dollars – to stand guard at a pipeline west of Kirkuk, said it was not people like him who were responsible for sabotage, "The negligence... comes from the NOC itself. And the guard shifts are not around the clock."

But an official at NOC, who did not want to be named, said tribal members themselves were blowing up the pipelines to boost the need for their services and get their contracts renewed.

"The tribes have manipulated the situation and in most cases, they themselves carry out the sabotage attacks," said the official.

Sheikh al-Asi said he was unaware of any cases where members of tribes had been behind such attacks.

Competition among tribes to win a lucrative security contract has done little for the already troubled ethnic relations between Kurds and Arabs in the Kirkuk area.

Sheikh Samir Muzhir al-Shahin of the al-Shummar, another Arab tribe, complained that his people have not been awarded any contracts even though there are three pipelines running through the villages where they live. Instead, the work has gone to Kurds who were expelled from the area by Saddam Hussein but have since returned.

"We met the contractors so as to get involved in the protection work, but they turned us and said they employed Kurds only," said al-Shahin. "So there are a lot of problems between us and the Kurds when it comes to protecting the pipelines."

Sheikh al-Asi of the al-Ubaid believes similar anti-Arab discrimination takes place in the recruitment process for the government's pipeline protection force.

"It would be better if they hired people from the areas closest to the oil pipelines, since it would encourage them to protect them more," he said.

But Kurds counter with exactly the same claims as this Arab chieftain – in reverse. Mohammed Kamal, a Kurdish member of the Kirkuk regional council, says it is Arabs and the Turkoman, a significant minority in this area, who hold most of the important posts in NOC.

As a result, claims Kamal, "Most of the oil protection contracts have gone to Arabs, not Kurds, [who] have been marginalised."

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