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Global Rescue evacuates victims from Haiti SECURITY CONCERNS

In crises, private firms can be a safety net

By: Megan Woolhouse Katie Johnston Chase | Published on Sunday January 17, 2010



LYNN UNIVERSITY / AP FILE PHOTO

Missing students from relief-mission group sponsored by Florida's Lynn University, include Britney Gengel, second from right in front row, who was mistakenly reported as having been rescued by a private security firm. (Jan. 11, 2010)

Britney Gengel's family and friends were overcome with relief to hear that a mysterious security agency had rescued the 19-year-old college student from Rutland, who had been missing in the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake. Then came the bad news: Reports were wrong and Gengel was still missing.

Officials at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Fla., which sponsored the relief-mission group Gengel had been part of, said the unnamed agency had received "bad intelligence."

"We don't know how it is that we got a report like that only to find out it was in fact wrong," said school spokesman Jason Hughes.

Some reports identified the agency as red24, a security firm headquartered in England that conducts hundreds of privately funded rescue efforts every year.

Red24, whose website says it is actively helping clients in Haiti, is one of several companies that assist people in high-risk situations like kidnappings, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters. They thrive in regions of the world where police or government aid may be inadequate or nonexistent. And they are often staffed by former members of the military, CIA, or FBI. Company officials at red24 did not return calls for this story.

"They're operating in trouble spots all over the world," said Kevin Lapwood, an analyst with Seymour Pierce Research in London. "They're in Afghanistan, they're operating in Iraq, they're operating in Somalia. They're in Sudan."

In recent years, red24 and security firms like it have built something of a niche industry by offering their services to corporations, governments, and others who can pay large sums to extract people from disaster zones or war-torn regions.

Red24, for example, charges companies a monthly retainer premium and in the event

of a disaster or threat, it accesses a database of security specialists worldwide who act as contractors and conduct the actual missions.

"We call it the contingency operations industry," said Doug Brooks, president of the International Peace Operations Association in Washington, which represents about 60 companies worldwide that offer a range of relief services, including the quick delivery of field hospital set-ups, off-road vehicles, and construction equipment to help save lives in the immediate aftermath of disasters like the Haiti quake.

Another private security and rescue firm, Boston-based Global Rescue, is searching for hundreds of people in Haiti, some of whom work for corporations. Chief executive Daniel Richards said an insurance company asked it to find 200 people, but he declined to provide specifics.

The first Global Rescue team, led by a former Navy SEAL and a member of the US Army's Special Forces, arrived in Haiti Thursday, Richards said, and the company expects to have 30 people on the ground by this morning. Richards said his clients include NASA, the State Department, the Chicago Tribune, and local companies Bain & Co. and EMC Corp.

EMC, whose 40,000 employees around the world are covered by Global Rescue when out of their country of origin, has been a client for two years. The Hopkinton data storage company has used Global Rescue's services about 10 times for medical emergencies, including to assist an employee who had a cardiac condition, said spokesman Patrick Cooley.

International SOS Assistance, a Philadelphia-based security firm, has about 60 clients in Haiti, according to Erin Giordano, its communications director, including 11 universities.

She said that company policy prevented her from identifying clients, which also include private companies, but added that many university students were in Haiti to study public health at the time of the earthquake.

The company dispatched two security specialists to Haiti Tuesday night, just after the quake, to link up with staff in the country. They immediately began searching for missing clients and planning evacuations. "We are in the heat of it now," she said, adding that as of last night the company was working 100 separate cases.

Lynn University officials said yesterday evening that they had hired a second company to assist in their search and recovery efforts. They would not identify the company by name, but an official at International SOS, who was not authorized to speak publicly about the case, said it was working with the school.

Meanwhile, Britney Gengel's father, Leonard, appeared on television yesterday and implored President Obama to send more rescue workers to Haiti.

"Father to father, I'm pleading with you to please, please get help and rescue to these folks," he said, his voice breaking.

Bryan Bender of the Globe staff contributed to this report. Megan Woolhouse can be reached at mwoolhouse@globe.com. Katie Johnston Chase can be reached at johnstonchase@globe.com.