

John Owens
Statement to Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs
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Thank you to Chairman Waxman, Chairman Tierney, and Members of the full committee for inviting me to testify today. My statement will address labor abuse, human trafficking, and other concerning issues that I personally witnessed at the construction site of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

My name is John Owens. I have worked on construction projects for many years and since 2002 I have worked on U.S. embassy projects. My specialty is architectural finishing. After I helped the U.S. government finish the construction of the embassy in Cambodia I was looking for a new project, so I agreed to work on the embassy in Baghdad. I signed up with First Kuwaiti—the primary contractor the construction of the embassy—as a general foreman on the construction site. In all, I was employed by First Kuwaiti for 8 months, from November 2005 to June 2006.

When I first arrived on the site of the U.S. embassy, the biggest thing that hit me right off the bat was, I wanted to know where all the Americans were. Based on my experience working on other embassies, I was used to seeing a large number of Americans on-site to manage the construction and direct workers. It turns out that two other Americans on site, however, they were not employed by First Kuwaiti. They were employed by subcontractors.

I would like to now take a moment and describe conditions on the site in more detail.

This was a “man camp”—by nature not the most pleasant of places to be—and yet conditions there were deplorable, beyond what even a working man should tolerate. Foreign workers were packed in the trailers tight. There was insufficient equipment and basic needs—stuff like shoes and gloves. If a construction worker needed a new pair of shoes, he was told “No, do with what you have” by First Kuwaiti managers.

The contract for these workers said they had to work 12 hours a day 7 days a week, with some time off on Friday for prayers. A few people from India told me they were making \$240 a month. A guy from Sierra Leone got paid \$300 a month. A Pakistani worker told me he got \$900 a month, but that he had to pay additional costs for their work permits and visas, and that all told he was making about \$300 a month after those costs.

Many of the workers were verbally and physically abused, intimidated, and had their salary docked for as much as three days pay for reasons such as being five minutes late, sitting down on the job, and other crazy stuff. Because I was the only American on-site working for First Kuwaiti, many of the workers thought I had the power to help them with their problems. Workers often came to me and told me they hadn't been paid overtime or that their salary had been shorted. They also came to me with their health problems, asking me if I could go off site and get them some medication.

It is not uncommon for a construction company to use native workers or even foreign workers to build an embassy. I

witnessed this at the other embassy construction sites I have worked on. However, I believe that if more Americans had been on-site at this embassy, the abuses I witnessed would not have been taking place. No American company would treat people the way I saw those people being treated. As I think about it, given the size of this job, my experience tells me that State Department would usually have far more American staff members on-hand to oversee the construction project.

I also want to touch briefly on the issue of human trafficking. I believe I witnessed it. When flying from Kuwait to Baghdad, I saw a bunch of workers with tickets to Dubai. Mine was the only one that said Baghdad. When I asked the First Kuwaiti manager, he said—“Shhh, don’t say anything. If Kuwaiti customs knows they’re going to Iraq, they won’t let them on the plane.” When we landed, these workers were taken away in busses. There was nobody manning the customs station at the airport in Baghdad—I just walked through on my way back to the Green Zone.

Mr. Chairmen and Members of the Committee, I believe I had more experience with building embassies than anybody else on that site. The embassy was not far enough along to use my specific architectural skills and so First Kuwaiti put me to work as a security liaison, among other tasks.

I think the American people might understand what was going through my head over there as I watched this abusive and unprofessional practice taking place. I kept thinking it would get better. I kept telling myself that it would get better, and after more time had passed and things didn't get any better, I felt so bad all the time and I realized it was time to resign and speak up for those who do not have a voice.

This ends my statement. I will be pleased to take your questions.