

**Kidnapping has become big business in countries like Nigeria. Amir Lechner discusses the growing global trend of snatching for ransom**

# COSSH AND CARRY

**K**idnappings for politics and ransom are as old as society itself. Many criminal gangs have been perfecting their techniques over decades, to the point where they can boast a more reliable profit margin than most legitimate businesses. Some countries, generally those suffering from a high crime rate, armed insurgency or ineffectual law enforcement, have gained a name for having very high kidnapping rates. But kidnappings occur everywhere in the world, and with each new region comes a new methodology, a new victim profile and a new set of precautions wary visitors need to employ.

According to police statistics, 442 kidnappings were reported during 2005 in London, England, alone. This number includes child abductions perpetrated by parents engaged in custody battles, as well as kidnappings that are part of gang wars – police officials estimate that about 70 per cent of the cases are gang related. But it is still a surprisingly high number considering these cases are reported in one of Europe's leading nations.

Though the crime is a recognised threat in many parts of the world, there is limited official statistical data or other verifiable information regarding this type of offence. Families and victims tend not to report the crime, fearing retribution by the gangs and, in some cases, corrupt police officers working with the criminals. As it is estimated that only one out of ten kidnapping cases worldwide is reported to authorities, official statistics – when available – are usually unreliable and their figures are low to the point that they do not represent the “street reality”. Furthermore, in many countries where kidnapping is a problem, police forces

are weak, corrupt, ill-trained and lacking equipment and personnel; accurate statistics are at the bottom of their agenda. In many countries kidnapping is so rampant that the crime is not newsworthy and kidnapping reports are buried in inner pages if they are covered at all, making it hard to track these events via open sources.

In recent years, kidnappings of the high net-worth individuals most commonly associated with ransom payments have actually decreased somewhat. While wealthy individuals are still a desirable target and therefore at risk, they have as a class become more aware of the threat and are now employing technology, armoured vehicles and security personnel to minimise the threat to themselves and their families. These measures have led those criminal gangs and terrorist organisations that fund some of their activities with ransom money – such as the FARC and ELN in Colombia – to target lower, but wider, layers of society. While ransom amounts are smaller, the effort put into planning and executing the abductions, as well as the logistics behind them, are made easier. Media attention and public interest are limited due to the lack of sensationalism, lowering the pressure usually put on the police by politicians, the media and the public to solve the crime. The overall risk associated with such kidnappings is generally much less, yielding risk-benefit factors that can be much more in the kidnappers' favour than those associated with the larger payoffs.

In India, for example, high net-worth individuals and celebrities are receiving governmental security details, just like elected governmental officials. While the government protects its VIPs, these measures are making India's middle-

class businessmen – and others perceived as earning higher salaries than average Indians – increasingly appealing and profitable targets for kidnapping gangs. India does indeed appear as one of the top ten countries of many kidnapping and ransom experts, with close to 1,800 cases of kidnapping registered in the state of Bihar alone during 2006. By some reports, that would make kidnapping for ransom the state's most prolific industry. A recent report indicates that in the first three months of 2007 more than 900 people,

primarily doctors, lawyers, contractors, businessmen and school students, were kidnapped in Bihar. Dozens of victims were killed after being kidnapped, resulting in the migration of well-to-do professionals to larger cities, while sending their children to boarding schools outside the state.

Kidnappers tend to identify and target weak communities in society. In the Philippines, for example, kidnapping gangs tend to kidnap members of the Chinese-Filipino communities who are in most cases wealthier than the average Filipino, but rarely involve police in the negotiation process and tend to pay ransom demands quickly. In Trinidad and Tobago, as well as in Sri Lanka, gangs are targeting local residents of Indian origin as they are perceived to be wealthier than the population at large; soft targets that are unlikely to organise and fight back.

With today's business approach, which tends to view the world as a global village, an increasingly

favourable environment for kidnapping gangs is evolving; as more companies become multinational, increasing numbers of their executives and managers are sent on international trips to emerging markets. The foreign companies often launch their operations into the country with little knowledge of the local security situation, making their employees vulnerable targets for kidnappers. In these cases, the ransom demands are usually sent directly to the victim's foreign employer. If the employee is a local, a ransom demand might also be issued to the victim's family. Since corporations do not want to be known as payers of ransom, and also do not want to be liable for a murdered or injured employee, the path of least resistance for most foreign companies is to simply pay the ransom as discreetly as is possible. Any negotiation of the ransom amount will likely be handled through an experienced third party, such as those often employed by insurance companies.

In sufficient numbers, kidnappings can have a massive impact on the economics of a region. Those with means will endeavour to relocate to an area they perceive to be safer, leading to a “brain drain” of the highest-paid individuals. Businesses will generally follow, both out of fear for their employees and to simply follow their potential employee pool. This can be seen in Mexican cities such as Tijuana and Nuevo Laredo; both have experienced mass exoduses of local businessmen, fleeing across the US-Mexico border out of fear for themselves and their families.

In many of the highest risk zones, kidnappings can resemble complex business transactions. In Colombia and Iraq, for example, many smaller kidnapping gangs will sell their victims to larger, more established organisations. These organisations are better placed to extort larger ransoms out of the victims' families or employers. In many cases, they will continue to make demands, even after the initial lump-sum ransom has been paid. In politically volatile regions, some foreigners originally abducted by criminal organisations are sold to terrorist groups. In these cases, the victim is held for an extended period of time, while the terrorist group attempts to get the maximum amount of publicity, money, and/or political concessions it can from the situation.

Kidnappings in sensitive areas, such as Nigeria's Delta region, can have global implications. Nigeria is a significant oil exporter to many world powers, including the United States and China. As foreign oil corporations have expanded operations in the oil-rich Delta region, so have the kidnapping gangs that prey on their employees. More than 100 foreigners were kidnapped from the region between November 2006 and February 2007, affecting oil production, which in turn can affect the global cost of oil. The situation has become so severe that three major oil corporations – Royal Dutch Shell, Total and Agip – have begun to forbid their employees from leaving their gated residential compounds. Since the beginning of 2006, kidnappings and bombings from local terrorist and criminal groups have ▶



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► cut Nigeria's crude oil output by an estimated 25 per cent.

Political kidnappings carried out by insurgent and terrorist organisations – such as those occurring in Iraq and Afghanistan – are the most difficult to deal with, as the kidnappers are demanding political concessions rather than simple monetary ransoms. Governments, in most cases, tend not to give in to such political extortion, putting the victim's life at greater risk.

Kidnapping is an evolving phenomenon; smaller gangs around the world are constantly trying new techniques and seeking new types of victims. The most effective of these techniques can spread rapidly through a region. In Latin America, two trends of kidnapping have emerged in recent years, presenting a new set of challenges both to travellers and locals. "Express kidnappings" involve a victim being abducted, then forced to withdraw their own ransom from a bank or ATM. If all goes well, the victim is released afterwards, generally after having been relieved of all valuables on their person, and occasionally in their residence. "Virtual kidnappings" do not involve an actual kidnapping, but the victims are led to believe that a loved one was kidnapped. Many of these ransom calls are made from jailed inmates. Ransom is often demanded in the form of calling cards to allow the inmates to call future victims. A more sophisticated technique was recently revealed in which a person is placed in a situation where they are incommunicado – a phoney cellular phone company representative asks them to shut off their phone for several hours for repairs, for example. The targeted person's family or employers are then contacted and told that the person has been kidnapped. They are then given a relatively small, easily obtainable ransom demand. The timeframe given for ransom delivery is, necessarily, short.

Despite the many variations kidnappings can take, there are two general activities visitors should pursue prior to travelling to higher-risk regions: education and research. A traveller should know something of the culture they are entering, something of the overall crime rate, and something of the reliability of local authorities. Take pains to not stand out – do not wear visible expensive jewellery, cellular



Indian school children demonstrate against the spate of kidnappings in Bihar state

phones or clothing. As much as possible, adopt the local fashions to avoid being identified as a foreigner. Use only trusted transportation services, such as those provided by a reputable hotel. Keep a close eye on local news for any potential catalysts for change in the local security situation. Maintain communication with your employer and/or local embassy, keeping them generally informed as to your schedule and whereabouts. For extended stays in high-risk areas, avoid using the same routes if at all possible.

Overall, one would do well to remember that for most gangs, kidnapping is a for-profit business, with carefully weighed

risks and benefits; often, the best way to deter a potential kidnapper is simply to make oneself a risky investment of their time and resources. **i**

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