EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SUMMARY

This issue of Constellis’ Kidnap for Ransom Insight Report covers global kidnapping incidents and trends over the months of March and April, as well as the start of May 2017. The information is derived from multi-source analysis of kidnap for ransom activity and where known, the outcome or resolution of the event. The report covers current kidnap for ransom hotspots at the regional, national and provincial level with particular focus on areas where K&R activity is increasing.

Statistical analysis of data for March and April 2017 is included on page 17, which graphically displays K&R trends by region, victims by nationality and employment sector, as well as identifying the Top 10 counties for kidnapping of foreign nationals over the reporting period.

The global piracy update provides an overview of the piracy threat by region, providing trend analysis for the first quarter of 2017 and April. It also offers sample cases occurring through the months of March and April 2017, which provide an illustration of the identified trends.

The Cyber Security section examines current issues affecting companies and individuals in the realm of IT security. This edition will look into the impact of the “WannaCry” virus, the largest coordinated ransomware attack ever recorded at a global level, which from 12 May 2017 affected at least 105 countries and 200,000 operating systems worldwide.

The Focus Article offers an analysis of violence targeting NGO workers globally, with kidnapping representing the second most common form of violence against humanitarian staff since 2014. Although often less fatal than less sophisticated forms of criminality, abductions remain an important concern to aid organisations, both in conflict zones and nominally stable environments. Central Africa has emerged as an area of particular threat for this form of violent activity, as humanitarian workers are increasingly targeted amid a wider deterioration of security in the region.
GLOBAL OVERVIEW

AMERICAS

During the period March-April 2017, the Americas experienced a further increase in the number of foreign nationals targeted in kidnapping events across the continent, recording a 30% rise in figures compared to the first two months of 2017. The increase in attacks over the end of Q1 2017 was principally led by events in Colombia, where the formal peace accord between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) has exacerbated a growth in criminality by militant groups. Notably, while the FARC have initiated the demobilisation of their regular forces, other armed groups such as the National Liberation Army (ELN), dissident FARC units and the BACRIM (former paramilitary groups), along with criminal organisations, have come to fill the power vacuum, increasingly resorting to kidnapping as a means of both financing activities and exerting political leverage. For the moment, foreign nationals have not emerged as a distinct target of such groups, but rather have encountered challenges as a consequence of the wider proliferation in attacks on civilians.

CASES:

On 17 April, five foreign tourists, including three Americans, a Spaniard and a French national, were kidnapped by alleged FARC dissidents while practicing extreme sports in Vaupés department, Colombia, close to the border with Brazil. The victims were rescued by the Colombian police in coordination with the army, on 22 April. The hostages were reportedly found in the indigenous community of Buenos Aires, approximately 136 km away from where they were kidnapped.

On 29 March, a Venezuelan-Colombian dual national, Beckenbauer Sierra, was kidnapped by armed men while travelling on a bus with a relative from Nula, Venezuela, towards the municipality of Saravena, Arauca department, in Colombia. According to eyewitnesses, two men wearing ELN armbands, boarded the bus and headed directly to where the victim was sitting, taking him away. According to the Colombian authorities, there has not been a ransom demand so far.

In Mexico, virtual kidnapping (a practice where kidnappers attempt to extort a ransom by falsely claiming to have abducted individuals), continues to be a preferred tactic among criminal groups. Travelers in Mexico, especially Spanish speakers, have been increasingly targeted by this scam, commonly occurring at their hotels by criminals claiming to be cartel members. In incidents reported over the past year, sums up to USD 700,000 have been demanded by kidnappers.

CASES:

A Spanish engineer travelling on business in Mexico, became the victim of a virtual kidnapping, during which criminals attempted to extort 50,000 euros from his family as a “ransom”. The criminals contacted the victim at his hotel in Salina Cruz, Oaxaca State, and through a ruse, convinced him to change his accommodation. The engineer was then “held” for several hours in the new hotel under threats he received by telephone. The next morning, the victim persuaded the kidnappers to allow him to return to his work place so that no one was alarmed by his absence. Once at work, and still in telephone contact with the criminals through a mobile phone they forced him to purchase, he was able to report the incident. After being notified, the Spanish authorities prevented a payment being made from the victim’s family and his employer, who had been led to believe that he was in the hands of cartel members. The Spanish police said the employer was willing to pay the ransom.

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EUROPE

While violent crime rates, including kidnapping for ransom, are typically lower in Western Europe than in other regions of the world, isolated incidents nonetheless continue to be reported. Kidnapping events in these countries are commonly linked to business or personal disputes and the victim’s associations with the local criminal underworld.

CASES:

- On 3 April, the owner of a local company was kidnapped in a locality of Rhone-Alpes, France, by two of his workers, who forced him into a vehicle, taking him to Belgium. The kidnappers contacted his family and demanded a ransom of €25,000, as well as forcing the victim to withdraw money from several ATMs. The kidnappers, upon learning that the victim’s family contacted the authorities, decided to release him after 18 hours, and were subsequently arrested. After questioning, it was revealed the kidnapping took place after a financial dispute between the victim and one of the suspects.

- On 4 May, local police in Alicante, Spain, detained two Belgian citizens, accused of kidnapping a local resident and demanding 150,000 euros for his release. The arrest was made as the suspects were taking the victim to a bank to withdraw the ransom. The authorities were alerted by the victim’s son, who also reported that his father had been receiving threats in the past weeks. The suspects were reportedly known to the victim, as he used to work for them as their accountant.

Political and security challenges have accelerated in Turkey over the past year, particularly after the July 2016 failed coup and corresponding state of emergency, which remains in place. Alongside a persistent threat from terrorist groups and displacement of civilians from neighbouring conflict zones, kidnapping activity in the country has reported a marked increase since the end of 2016, with a notable surge in the abduction of foreign nationals, primarily among migrant groups. Victims in the past have been subjected to torture and long captivity periods. While this trend has not affected western nationals to date, the threat to western expatriates may expand in the future as kidnapping gangs become more established.

CASES:

- Three Pakistani nationals were kidnapped for ransom in Istanbul, on 6 March. According to reports, the kidnappers had demanded a USD 60,000 ransom from the families of the abductees and threatened to kill the victims if it was not paid. Sources close to the families of the victims said the kidnappers used social media to communicate their ransom demands and that the families had received videos showing the victims being tortured. The three victims were released by the Turkish authorities after 23 days.

- An Iranian businessman was rescued by Turkish authorities in the Nusaybin district of the south-eastern province of Mardin on 21 April, 85 days after he was kidnapped in Van city. The victim, who was in Turkey on business, said his captors had sent a video to his family showing him being tortured to pressure them to pay USD 5 million in ransom.

Video footage sent to the families of three Pakistani nationals kidnapped in Istanbul (Daily Times)
Armed conflict in Iraq, Syria and Yemen continues to undermine security and stability across the region. Kidnapping for ransom has proliferated under such circumstances, where a plethora of threat actors engage in this activity, including criminal elements profiting from the absence of effective law enforcement. Additionally, international counter-terrorism operations in the region, particularly campaigns directed against the Islamic State group (IS), may result in an increase in the already high threat of kidnapping in the region, especially to foreign nationals, as IS attempts to gain leverage and publicity against the international coalition. Nonetheless, local nationals will continue to be the primary victims of kidnapping in these countries, owing to a reduced presence of foreign citizens.

CASES:

On 21 April 2017, 26 foreign hunters, allegedly including members of Qatar’s royal family and two Saudi nationals, were released by their captors after almost 500 days in captivity in Iraq. Although there was never a public claim of responsibility from the captors, the Iran-backed Shia militia Kata’ib Hezbollah has been suspected of being behind the incident which took place on December 2015, in Iraq’s southern province of Al Muthanna. Media sources affirmed that the release of the hostages occurred as part of a wider deal that also saw the evacuation of thousands of civilians from a number of villages in Syria, as well as the release of 500 rebels from Syrian prisons. The deal was reportedly brokered by Iran and Qatar, and involved many of the region’s most powerful non-state players, including Lebanese Hezbollah and the Syrian jihadi umbrella group Ahrar al-Sham. It has also been alleged that Qatar paid millions of dollars (some sources citing an amount of USD 90 million), to the hostage takers, in addition to payments to other parties, including Syrian jihadi groups which facilitated the population transfer. Additionally, alleged Iraqi official correspondence leaked to the media revealed that the Iraqi government had seized USD 500 million from a Qatari plane, which is believed was intended as payment for the release of the hunters.

On 8 March, Iraqi forces carried out a security operation in central Basra, releasing a Lebanese businessman who had been kidnapped the previous day. Although the authorities said the motive of the kidnapping was unknown, local sources have linked the incident to a business dispute.

Kidnapping in Yemen, a prevalent issue even prior to the outbreak of conflict in March 2015, continues to be one of the main security threats in the country, where terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and IS have previously stated their intent to specifically target foreign nationals. Kidnapping has also become a common tactic for the Houthi-Saleh coalition, mostly in the form of illegal detention, also affecting foreign nationals in the past, amid a resurgence in maritime piracy off the country’s southern coastline.

CASES:

Father Tom Uzhunnalil, who was kidnapped by Islamic State militants in Aden on March 2016, has again appealed for help in a new video. In the video, Uzhunnalil said his kidnappers had communicated their demands to the Indian government and the Catholic bishop in Abu Dhabi, but the response was “not encouraging”. He also stressed that his health is deteriorating quickly and that he requires hospitalisation as soon as possible. The authenticity of the video, allegedly shot on 15 April 2017, has not been ascertained yet.

Somali pirates attempted to hijack a bulk carrier ship on 8 April, off the coast of Aden, Yemen. The attacked vessel was identified as the Tuvalu-flagged OS35, a cargo ship owned by a company registered in Lebanon. The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) confirmed it had received notification of the attack, saying the ship may have been boarded. In a joint operation, the Indian navy and its Chinese counterpart rescued the vessel on 9 April, with all its 19 Filipino crew reported safe. It was ascertained by naval authorities that the pirates had escaped at night, after noticing the ongoing rescue operations mounted by international maritime forces.
AFRICA

Africa continued to lead Constellis statistics for kidnapped foreign nationals globally over the reporting period. From March-April 2017, the region experienced a remarkable two-fold increase in the number of kidnapped foreign nationals with respect to the previous two-month period, numbering 139 kidnapped individuals and 72% of total recorded incidents globally. Although mass kidnapping incidents continue to drive up the number of victims in the continent, a general increase in single abductions has also been identified. This trend is particularly evident in Libya, where foreign nationals, predominantly unskilled workers, continue to be a preferred target of militias and criminal groups. Urban centres such as Sebha, Tripoli and Misrata are currently assessed as the top hotspots for kidnapping within the country.

CASES:

▶ At least 55 Tunisian nationals were reported kidnapped in Libya in two different incidents in March. On 19 March, more than 50 Tunisians were abducted by militiamen in the coastal territory of Rechfana. According to local sources, the kidnappers have demanded the release of one of their colleagues imprisoned in Tunisia. The next day, the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the press that the government, along with Libyan authorities, had launched investigations into the abduction of five Tunisian nationals in Tripoli. The details of the incident were not made public.

▶ Meanwhile in Nigeria, expatriates continue to fall victim of kidnapping for ransom, a pervasive issue in the country. On 9 April, two Turkish construction workers were abducted by gunmen from their hotel in Eket, Akwa Ibom state, in the Niger Delta, and taken into the creeks of Calabar. According to local media, the kidnappers made an initial ransom demand of 100 million naira (over USD 316,000) for each of the victims. The hostages were released after 10 days in captivity, in a police rescue operation that also resulted in the arrest of five suspects.

▶ In an unusual incident, a well-known Portuguese businessman and property owner was kidnapped in Swaziland, on 16 April. Although crime scene evidence suggested the victim may have been seriously injured during the attack, the Swaziland police has stated that the hostage is still alive. According to local sources, the kidnappers have demanded €5 million for his release. A number of arrests have been made in connection to the case, including a Chinese national and his Vietnamese wife, who are believed to have ties to the Chinese mafia.
AFRICA

Despite the increased presence of UN peacekeepers in recent years, militant groups in Central Africa, remain an active threat to both local communities and expatriate workers alike, with kidnapping often used as a means of funding armed activities and exerting pressure on state authorities. In South Sudan, the security situation continues to deteriorate, with March and April witnessing an increase in attacks against civilians and aid workers. While the South Sudanese government is striving to keep the economy afloat by reassuring oil companies of security conditions for their operations, the kidnapping of oil workers in Upper Nile state has also highlighted the frail operating conditions in the country.

CASES:

▶ On 9 March, two Indian oil workers were kidnapped by Sudan People’s Liberation Army-In Opposition (SPLA-IO) militants from the Adar oilfield. This incident was followed by the kidnapping of four other oil workers, including a Pakistani national, on 18 March, taken by rebels from the Palloch Oilfield. According to local sources, all the six victims worked for an oil consortium formed by China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), China’s Sinopec and Malaysia’s Petronas. While the militants stated the attacks were carried out in a bid to force oil companies to leave the country, the government affirmed the militants were demanding a ransom of USD 1 million for the release of the hostages. The oil workers were released on 31 March. The conditions of their release were not made public, although it transpired that Ethiopia and Sudan were involved in the negotiations.

▶ In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Canadian mining company Banro Corporation confirmed on 2 March the kidnapping of five of its workers at the Namoya gold mine, located in Kabambare, Maniema province. The company stated that the victims included a French national, a Tanzanian and three Congolese. Banro also alleged that the Rahiya Mutomboki militia was behind the kidnapping, as the group had recently been threatening the mine and its workers. According to the media, the militia demanded a ransom of USD 1 million for the release of the hostages. All hostages were subsequently released by the group. It remains unclear whether a ransom was paid.
Since late 2015, Constellis’ statistics for Asia have been driven consistently by Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) activity in the southern Philippines and eastern Malaysia. As counter-terrorism operations targeting the ASG have intensified in the last couple of months, kidnapping numbers in the region have witnessed a corresponding reduction, with no successful kidnappings of foreign nationals attributed to the group over March and April 2017. The increased military pressure on the group and the killing of some of its key leaders by the Philippines security forces is assessed to have resulted in a reduction of the group’s ground capabilities, particularly regarding kidnap for ransom. Nonetheless, given the resilience of ASG over the past three years to both survive government offensives as well as adapt tactics to the changing environment, an underlying threat to expatriate visitors in the region is likely to persist for the medium to long term. In the face of current challenges, the group has instead focussed on expanding its territorial reach beyond traditional strongholds in the southern Philippines, to central and eastern territories, adding new potential challenges to areas historically secure from militant incursions.

**CASES:**

- On 9 April, the US government, followed by other western countries, issued a travel warning advising against possible abductions by members of extremist groups in the southern Island region of Central Visayas, including Cebu and Bohol provinces. Following the warning, an ASG incursion in Bohol was foiled by Filipino troops on 12 April. According to investigations, the intercepted ASG unit was the vanguard of a kidnapping expedition targeting westerners in the area. Most recently, on 9 May, the US government issued travel warnings on reported plans by terrorist groups to conduct kidnapping operations targeting foreign nationals in Palawan Province, including Puerto Princesa City and its surroundings.

- A kidnapped British national of Pakistani origin was released in a rescue operation by Pakistani police on 8 May, 16 days after his kidnapping. The operation took place as the kidnappers allegedly were transporting the victim to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Shazad Khan was kidnapped while on a visit to his family at his native town of Hazro, in Punjab province. He had been taken during a raid carried out by armed men on the family home on 20 April. It was reported that the kidnappers had demanded Rs 5 crore (almost USD 500,000) in ransom for his safe release.

- Elsewhere in Afghanistan, the 12-year-old son of a prominent Kabul businessman was kidnapped on 11 April while on his way to school. The businessman reported having been extorted USD 2 million for the release of his son. The victim was rescued by the Kabul police after 20 days in captivity and one of four suspects was arrested. It was reported that the victim had been held in very poor conditions.

**ASIA**

Crime rates continue to rise in Pakistan, as a result of endemic poverty, corruption and an ineffective police force. Kidnapping for financial gain is a widespread and frequent occurrence in the country, with both high profile locals and common citizens the primary targets of attacks. In Pakistan, as well as in India and Afghanistan, the targeting of returnee expatriate workers has also emerged as a phenomenon in recent decades, often committed by individuals known to the victims.
Statistics for March and April 2017 are drawn from Constellis’ record of 193 kidnapped foreign nationals. Over January and February 2017, Constellis recorded a total of 152 foreign nationals kidnapped across the world.

*Results do not include the kidnapping of illegal migrants.
Mar-Apr 2017

KIDNAPPED FOREIGN CITIZENS

REGIONAL ORIGINS OF VICTIMS

1. NORTH AFRICA 32.6%
2. SOUTH EAST ASIAN 16.1%
3. SOUTH ASIAN 13.4%
4. LATIN AMERICAN 21.1%
5. CENTRAL ASIAN 2.1%
6. NORTH AMERICAN 2.6%
7. AFRICAN 5.7%
8. EUROPEAN 6.7%
9. MIDDLE EASTERN 7.8%
10. UNKNOWN 8.3%

MOST VICTIMISED SINGLE NATIONALITY

1. Tunisian
2. Filipino
3. Indian
4. Yemeni
5. Sri Lankan
6. American
7. Egyptian
8. Chinese
9. French
10. Turkish

MOST VICTIMISED OCCUPATIONAL SECTOR

1. Maritme 29%
2. Businesspeople 7.8%
3. Unknown 37.3%
4. Other 2.6%
5. Tourists 6.2%
6. Military 6.7%
7. OIL+GAS 1.6%
8. NGO 1.6%
9. Mining 1.6%
10. Professionals 1.0%
11. Health 0.5%

DISCLAIMER: These statistics herein presented are the result of a compilation of kidnapping incidents involving foreign nationals only, which have been reported in the media and other open sources. The information contained and its results are therefore partial as result of the incomplete nature of open-source material. Thus, this report should be taken only as a reference of general trends, taking its limitations into consideration.
After a period of stability and reduced pirate activity in the Gulf of Aden (GoA) for half a decade, the spotlight returned to Somali piracy over the reporting period, with the recording of two successful hijacking incidents within Somalia’s territorial waters over Q1 2017. In April, at least three more attacks were reported, including the hijacking of a bulk carrier off the coast of Aden, in Yemen, in a clear example of the enduring capabilities of Somali pirates. Moreover, 28 crew members were captured in the GoA during Q1 2017, in addition to 29 others in April. While it is assessed that the majority of incidents during this period have been opportunistic in nature, taking advantage of reduced vigilance and lack of adherence to Best Management Practices (BMP) by a number of vessels, the potential for a long term resurgence in offshore activity remains credible given the sustained capabilities of armed groups and criminal actors.

So far in 2017, the Gulf of Guinea has remained the primary hotspot for the kidnap for ransom of crew globally, accounting for 63% of the total number of incidents. Although long-range attacks throughout the Gulf of Guinea remain possible, kidnapping attacks up to 100 nautical miles from the Niger Delta coastline continue to be the most common threat, particularly off Bayelsa state waters.

Of enduring concern has been piracy activity in waters off the southern Philippines and eastern Malaysia, fluctuating from a surge in attacks over January and February to a relative lull from April 2017. Attacks in the area remain linked to developments in the militancy across the southern Philippines, specifically the activities of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Elsewhere in Asia, armed crime at anchorage continues to be reported, particularly in Indonesia and Bangladesh.

Following trends observed at the end of 2016, piracy and crime at sea has continued to decrease in overall numbers over the first quarter of 2017 and through April. According to the latest piracy report by the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), 43 ships were attacked worldwide during Q1 2017, accounting for a 7% decrease in comparison to the last quarter of 2016. At the same time, violence against crew continues to increase. Over the same period, a total of 58 crewmembers were taken by pirates, 27 of them for ransom. Most notable, was the reported death of two sailors in waters off the Philippines, highlighting the enduring nature of the threat in the area.

According to official reports, five Filipino crew members and other victims of unknown nationality, including the captain of the vessel, were kidnapped by the assailants. The kidnapped men were released after 25 days in captivity after their employer, a shipping company, negotiated with the pirates and paid the ransom demanded. The amount paid was not disclosed.

On 5 March, a Vietnamese general cargo ship, the MV Phu An 268, was able to escape a pirate attack after being chased for one and a half hours by suspected Abu Sayyaf men, off Lihiman Island, in the Sulu Sea. As soon as the skiff containing six armed men approached, the master of the ship raised the alarm and conducted evasive manoeuvres. A Malaysian patrol boat from the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) subsequently reached the scene and safely escorted the vessel to Sandakan port. All crew were reported safe.

On 30 March, a bulk carrier was boarded by Nigerian pirates off Brass terminal in Bayelsa state, Nigeria.
RANSOMWARE AT THE FOREFRONT OF SECURITY CONCERNS: THE “WANNACRY” VIRUS ATTACK

From Friday 12 May 2017, a large-scale cyber-attack struck hundreds of thousands of organisations and individual PC users around the world. TRANSMITTED via email, the virus known as “WannaCry” encrypted users’ PC files, threatening to destroy affected documents unless a ransom of USD 300 was paid in the virtual currency Bitcoin. The ransomware additionally threatened to increase the ransom demand as time elapsed. The tool was designed to address users of multiple countries, with translated messages in at least 28 different languages. According to cyber security observers, over 75,000 cases of ransomware linked to WannaCry and its variants occurred globally before the ransomware’s “kill switch” was accidentally triggered by a UK cyber security researcher, ending the spread of the virus. While ransomware attacks remain common, the worldwide scale and reach of WannaCry, its methodology and its relative success, make it an unprecedented event.

WannaCry has seen significant growth as a means of cyber-extortion in recent years, with over seven million incidents identified globally in Q2 of 2016 alone, more than double the number recorded during the same period a year earlier. According to some estimates, in 2016, such schemes caused losses of $1.5 billion at the global level. In addition to an exponential increase in incidents, the WannaCry attack may position 2017 as the worst year for ransomware attacks.

During the course of the May attack, reports of over 200,000 affected systems worldwide have been identified, with infections recorded in at least 105 countries, including the UK, Russia and China, targeting a variety of sectors. Among the worst affected was the National Health Service (NHS) in England and Scotland, which saw at least 45 hospitals and clinics affected, resulting in a shutdown of operations as well as cancellations and delays to patient treatment. Russia also suffered a disproportionate impact of the virus, accounting for approximately 60% of the total number of recorded attacks, targeting domestic banks, a number of government ministries, and a state-owned Russian railway firm. Other targets included Spain’s Telefonica, France’s Renault, Portugal’s Telecom, and the US’ FedEx. Some sources have estimated the total costs from the attack at USD 4 billion.

Hackers launching the ransomware virus WannaCry are suspected to have used an exploit called “EternalBlue”, which was developed by the US National Security Agency (NSA) and leaked by Wikileaks two months prior to the WannaCry attack. The “EternalBlue” exploit, a sequence of commands that takes advantage of a vulnerability in order to cause unintended behaviour on computer software or hardware, targeted a security gap in Microsoft Windows operating systems, affecting users who failed to update their software through the “fix” launched by Microsoft in March 2017. Although the attack has been stopped, there is concern that similar incidents will take place in the near future now that the software’s vulnerability has been fully exposed.

The WannaCry virus is not only the first of its kind in terms of its scale, significantly it also represents a link between the two most serious forms of cybersecurity threats in the world today: nation-state action (which in this case was characterised by the constant identification and stockpiling of cybersecurity vulnerabilities for their potential future use) and organised criminal action. The attack and its consequences have highlighted the need for users to recognise the importance of cybersecurity, in a world characterized for its growing dependency on the internet. Businesses in particular should understand the constantly changing cyber threat landscape and update procedures accordingly on a regular basis.

Future attacks, either by the same perpetrators or copycats, are likely to be less virulent as conditions will become harder to replicate, although similar viruses will continue to affect users failing to keep up with computer security updates. It is assessed that an increased risk will be faced by smaller companies who are more likely to use old versions of operating systems which are no longer receiving technical support.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Install and use an up-to-date antivirus solution (such as Microsoft Security Essentials)
- Make sure your software is up-to-date
- Avoid clicking on links or opening attachments / emails from unknown sources (people you don’t know or companies you don’t do business with)
- Ensure users select only trusted providers of software/ apps to prevent involuntary malware downloads
- Ensure you have smart screen in your browser, which helps identify reported phishing and malware websites and helps you make informed decisions about downloads
- Have a pop-up blocker running on your web browser
- Have at least two backups of important files; one locally and one on the web
Active in conflict zones around the world, NGO and humanitarian aid workers remain a regular target of both criminal and insurgent groups, whether for economic, political or ideological motivations.

To date, kidnapping represents the second most common form of violence against NGO workers worldwide, with 21% of all incidents against NGO workers recorded by the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD) in 2016 identified as abductions. Furthermore, while overall levels of violence against NGO workers have fallen over the past year, the number of kidnapping victims from humanitarian organizations actually increased in 2016, rising by 25% compared to 2015.

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Often targeted due to the perceived wealth or international status of employers, the majority of victims of such attacks remain local national staff (in 2016 the ratio of kidnapped nationals to international staff was about 5:1), although in general foreign workers have traditionally carried a higher risk of attack, given the comparatively greater financial and propaganda benefits armed groups are generally able to exploit through the abduction of expatriates, particularly western nationals.

Amid a general rise in targeting against such groups, distinctions in captivity periods have also become more pronounced in recent years, with local national captives typically held for a period of up to 10 days, compared to longer foreign kidnapping cases, often reaching into two months or more.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

Part of these trends can be traced back to a wider shift in the geographical breakdown of incidents, with attacks recorded by the AWSD between January 2016 and March 2017 largely concentrated on the African continent, notably Central Africa where aid workers have increasingly been forced to respond to humanitarian challenges alongside ongoing civil and political conflicts.

SOUTH SUDAN

Aid worker security in South Sudan has deteriorated in line with the general situation in the country over the past 12 months. Second only to Afghanistan in terms of violence against NGO workers, from January 2017, attacks against field staff in South Sudan have increased sharply, with March and April recording a surge in arbitrary detentions and kidnappings by both government and opposition groups. Recorded kidnapping incidents of aid workers in the country in the last 16 months have largely had durations of less than three days, with victims often suffering physical assault. Although ransom demands have occurred, most attacks appear to have taken place as an extension of the wider violence affecting the country, rather than a distinct development tied to financial motivations. The deterioration of the operating environment in the country has forced a number of organisations to temporarily halt operations in certain areas, particularly within the states of Jonglei, Unity and Upper Nile, impeding aid provision in the country and exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

DRC

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), clashes between opposition supporters and security forces have intensified since April 2016, increasing protection concerns for humanitarian aid workers. In eastern DRC, particularly in North Kivu, Kasai province and Tanganyika, attacks on civilians and aid workers by rebel militias have intensified, in what is assessed is part of a campaign of retaliation against the DRC armed forces and UN peacekeeping operations in the area. The security environment has been particularly unstable in North Kivu, a longstanding hotspot for rebel K&R activity. Kidnappings of civilians and humanitarian aid workers have been particularly elevated in Rutshuru, Lubero, and Masisi territories of the province, with more than 20 aid workers reported kidnapped in the DRC over 2016, most of them in North Kivu. Furthermore, as violence has extended to other provinces in 2017, so too has the phenomenon of kidnapping. Most incidents are carried out by non-state actors, commonly linked to the various militias with a presence in the country. In contrast to South Sudan, such kidnappings are commonly carried out for financial motivations, and a number of aid organisations have been known to have paid ransoms in the past for the release of their staff.

CAR

The Central African Republic’s (CAR) security environment has remained unstable since mid-2016, with recurrent outbreaks of communal violence and militant activity, particularly witnessed in the last three months. Attacks on aid workers in the CAR, largely in the north of the country, have led a number of international humanitarian organisations to suspend work, and others to reduce their presence in a number of locations where it is assessed the threat to their staff and operations is critical. A number of aid organisations still active in the capital Bangui, have also expressed their willingness to implement a full withdrawal if the security situation in CAR continues to deteriorate. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), during the first quarter of 2017, there were 33 recorded incidents targeting humanitarians in the country, placing CAR among the highest risk countries for humanitarian aid workers globally. Sixteen of those attacks have occurred since March in the northern prefecture of Ouhani. Kidnapping in CAR is however less prevalent as a means of violence in the country; only four incidents were recorded through 2016 and one between January-April 2017. All cases were carried out by non-state actors, most of them suspected to have had financial motivations.

CASES:

On 13 March 2017, eight local aid workers for American NGO Samaritan Purse were kidnapped by armed rebels near Mayendit, Unity State of South Sudan. According to some reports, the aid workers were kidnapped in order to pressure the organisation to deliver aid to specific areas. The victims were released after two days. The incident followed an order by the government of South Sudan for humanitarian organisations to withdraw from Mayendit in preparation for a major military campaign. Also in March, the government announced plans to charge a visa levy of $10,000 per foreign aid worker and stressed the danger of abduction in the country.

Two members of a UN panel of experts that monitors sanctions on the DRC were seized along with four Congolese citizens in Kasai Central province. The group was in transit from Kananga, the main town of the province, to Tshimbulu, when they were abducted by unidentified armed men on 12 March 2017. The UN workers were identified as an US national and a Swedish-Chilean national. The beheaded bodies of the kidnapped researchers were found, along with that of their Congolese interpreter, in a shallow grave two weeks after their abduction. The Kamwina Nsapu militia has been identified as the most likely perpetrator of the attack.

On 27 April 2017, the remains of a local aid worker were discovered in Selim, Mbomou prefecture in CAR. The victim had been abducted by gunmen with suspected links to the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) while travelling between Selim and Raffai.
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