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Kidnap for Ransom Overview

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This report is based on open source information and aims to highlight current news, trends and analysis of kidnap for ransom incidents globally over the reporting period.

Note: The information contained in this report is based on open source material, including news articles and should be regarded as offering a snapshot of global kidnap incidents. Given the selectivity and incomplete or inaccurate nature of some news articles, the information contained in this report is not exhaustive or 100% accurate. As such any conclusions made from this report should take these limitations into account.
Libya

The extremely poor security situation in Libya means the overall threat from kidnap remains severe across the country. This was demonstrated on 19 February, when two Serbian nationals kidnapped in November 2015 were killed in a suspected US air strike targeting a training camp used by IS militants. The hostages were killed along with more than 50 IS militants, including a senior Tunisian operative, near the western coastal city of Sabratha. The two Serbian nationals were employed by the Serbian embassy in Libya. According to Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić, the kidnappers were motivated by ‘a financial interest’.

Due to Libya’s fractured political system (underlined by the competing Tobruk and Tripoli based administrations) politicians have often been targeted. On 10 February unidentified gunmen kidnapped Mohammed Al-Murghani and Basheer Al-Fitouri, both working for Ain Zara municipality in Tripoli’s southeast. Both were released a few hours later, after which the municipality announced the suspension of services due to the evident kidnap threat to employees and members.

In a similar incident on 27 January, a member of the Tobruk-based internationally recognised government, Mohamed Raied, was seized by a militia group whilst on his way to Tripoli. Local Tobruk elders are in contact with the abductors in an attempt to free him.

Syria / Lebanon

On 22 February IS militants released the remaining 42 hostages of 230 Assyrian Christians who were kidnapped in 2015 in Syria. The kidnappers demanded USD18 million for their release, however this figure was reportedly lowered through negotiations. Though the ransom settlement was not disclosed, a Christian official suggested less than half the initial demand was paid to secure their release. During the negotiations a bank account was opened in Erbil, Iraq, in which donations from across the world were made. A senior Assyrian priest in northern Syria mediated the negotiations that led to the safe release of the hostages, most of whom were women and children.

On 13 February five perpetrators abduct Lebanese national Osama Moawad in Jbeil, west Lebanon. The perpetrators reportedly called the victim’s family demanding a USD1 million ransom for his release. Moawad was rescued when security forces stopped his kidnappers in Kesrouan district while en route to the Bekaa Valley, an area in eastern Lebanon beset by insecurity. Kidnap for ransom incidents are widespread across Lebanon, predominantly targeting domestic nationals perceived to command a high ransom value.

On 08 February Lebanese security forces released a former Kuwaiti colonel who was kidnapped from his farm in Quob Elias. Due to conflicting reports, the exact date of his abduction is unknown, however some reports suggest he was abducted on 17 December 2015. The perpetrators demanded USD1.5 million from his family. Lebanese security forces secured his release and arrested all gang members associated with his kidnapping.

Iraq

In a positive development, Iraqi Kurdish forces rescued a 16-year-old Swedish girl held in captivity by IS militants near Mosul on 17 February. The young girl was reportedly ‘misled’ by an IS sympathiser in Sweden to travel to Syria and later Mosul.

On 16 February three US nationals, who were kidnapped from a Baghdad apartment a month earlier, were released unharmed. According to US Department of State officials, Iraqi authorities secured their release through negotiations, however it remains unconfirmed whether a ransom was paid. Though the identity of the kidnappers has not been disclosed, mediation efforts directed by prominent Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr suggest the perpetrators are members of a Shia militia.

On the same day the UN confirmed the death of one of its representatives in Diyala province, who was kidnapped in Baqubah in April 2015.

Yemen

Amid the ongoing conflict in Yemen, journalists face severe kidnap threats across the country. According to a report by Reporters Without Borders, 17 journalists and media workers are currently held hostage by the Shia Houthi rebels and the militant Islamist group Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

In late January three Al Jazeera journalists were released by their kidnappers after 10 days in suspected Houthi captivity. The trio were seized while filming clashes between pro-government forces and Houthi rebels in the besieged city of Taizz. Houthi rebels are responsible for carrying out multiple politically motivated abductions aimed at silencing dissent.
Sahel

Although there were few kidnap incidents reported in the Sahel region in February, two high-profile cases in January reflect the deteriorating security situation in Mali and Burkina Faso.

On 07 January Swiss national Beatrice Stockly, who was previously abducted by Islamist militants in Timbuktu in 2012, was taken hostage for the second time. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) claimed the kidnapping and demanded the release of a militant jailed in Mali and one of the group’s leaders, Abu Tourab, in exchange for the hostage's release.

As a Swiss Christian missionary and social worker living in Timbuktu, Stockly had high exposure to the country-wide kidnap threat. In addition, the group accused the victim of not respecting the condition for her first release, which stated she must not return to any Muslim country to preach Christianity.

On 15 January Dr Ken Elliott and his wife Jocelyn, both in their 80s, were kidnapped in Djibo, Burkina Faso. The AQIM-linked Emirate of the Sahara, a group operating in northern Mali, is reportedly behind the abduction. Sources indicate the elderly Australian couple were taken over the border to Mali.

The couple had been living in Burkina Faso for over 40 years, operating a surgical clinic where Elliott was the sole surgeon and doctor. It remains unclear whether the abduction was linked to the attack carried out on the same day by AQIM targeting a hotel and a restaurant in Ouagadougou which killed at least 29 people. The kidnappers subsequently released Jocelyn Elliott on 06 February and shortly after she appeared in a press conference in Niger. No ransom was reportedly paid for her release.

Nigeria

In line with recent trends the vast majority of kidnap victims in Nigeria in 2016 to date have been domestic nationals, though foreign nationals face a high kidnap threat across Nigeria and in the country’s maritime domain.

Prominent political figures and their families continue to be targeted for ransom. On 17 February the foster father and cousin of former president Goodluck Jonathan were kidnapped in Ogbia, Bayelsa state. This is the second time Jonathan's foster father has been kidnapped, and his whereabouts remain unknown at the time of writing. The former president's cousin was found dead on 17 February.

On 16 February gunmen abducted the mother of Senator Emmanuel Aguiarawodo at her residence in Okpare-Olomu, Delta state.

On 14 February masked gunmen kidnapped the 85-year-old mother of the Rivers state Commissioner for Information and Communication in Okrika. The perpetrators demanded a NGN30 million (USD151,000) ransom. Similarly, on 08 February the mother of the deputy governor of Taraba state was kidnapped from her residence and held captive for several days. The abductors demanded NGN300 million (USD1.5 million) for her release.

On 09 February the district head of Pai community was kidnapped in Kwali, Abuja state and held hostage for three days. On 08 February gunmen abducted eight people in a Kaduna state village after a three-hour gun battle with security forces. Repeated attacks have spread fears across communities in Kaduna state as armed bandits appear to have moved from cattle rustling to kidnap for ransom. The bandits use similar methods to Boko Haram militants, killing male victims and abducting women.

Kenya / Somalia

On 18 February Somali security forces rescued a Kenyan national held hostage for 15 months in Somalia. Uncorroborated reports in Kenyan and Somali media suggest the abductors had links to the militant Islamist group Al-Shabab. The kidnappers reportedly demanded a USD1 million ransom for the victim.

On 12 January a gang kidnapped seven Kenyan nationals in the Longisa trading centre in Bomet County. Shortly after the kidnappers called victims’ relatives and demanded a ransom of KES100,000 (USD980) for each of the hostages.

The majority of kidnap incidents in Kenya involve domestic nationals, however foreign nationals in the country still face a moderate-high threat of kidnap in areas within 60km of the Kenya-Somalia border, particularly in Garissa County and in coastal areas north of Pate Island. The militant group Al-Shabaab continues to pose the most potent kidnap threat in southern Somalia and along Kenya’s eastern border areas.
**Mexico**

On 21 February it was reported that the bodies of six people abducted in late 2015 had been found in Puebla City, capital of Puebla state. The victims were from the Lomas de San Miguel neighbourhood, and were reportedly kidnapped on the orders of a businessman in retaliation for a robbery.

On the same day, federal authorities in Tamaulipas found 84 migrants from Central America hidden inside a truck en route to Veracruz. An estimated 500,000 migrants from Central America transit through Mexico each year, many of whom pay an average of USD4,000 to smugglers (or coyotes) who control the illicit trade. The migrants are often targeted and kidnapped by organised criminal groups, who exploit their vulnerability and reluctance to inform authorities. On 08 February federal authorities rescued at least 60 kidnapped migrants from a house in Reynosa, Tamaulipas.

On 08 February eight gunmen wearing military uniforms abducted a female journalist, Anabel Flores Salazar, from her home in Orizaba, Veracruz. Flores' body was found the following day in neighbouring Puebla state. The journalist was covering local crime and police activities and recently reported the apparent murder of a store owner. According to a family member who witnessed the abduction, the gunmen claimed they had “a warrant for [Flores'] arrest”, and ignored family pleas that she recently gave birth to a child in addition to having a four-year-old son.

**Colombia**

On 08 February security forces rescued Luis Antonio Valezuela – a resident of the Orito municipality – in the southwestern department of Putumayo, following his kidnapping by an unidentified group earlier the same day. Local media reported the victim was able to communicate his position via mobile phone during the initial stage of his abduction, expediting the subsequent army operation.

Despite the improving security situation in Colombia the National Liberation Army (ELN) – the second largest armed guerrilla group in the country after the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) – continues to perpetrate financially and politically motivated kidnappings. On 03 February the ELN kidnapped Corporal Jair de Jesus Villar Ortiz during a security operation against the group. The high-profile abduction took place in the municipality of Segovia, in the northeastern department of Antioquia. Corporal Ortiz is still in captivity at the time of writing.

On 02 February unidentified gunmen kidnapped the wife and four daughters of Carlos Hugo ‘Chocolate’ Garcia, one of the senior leaders of the ‘Los Rastrojos’ drug cartel. The victims were abducted on the road between Cali and the nearby town of Jamundi in the Valle del Cauca department as they left their residence in the Atanasio Girardot neighbourhood.

On 01 February local security forces rescued ranch owner Orlando Triana Andrade in the municipality of Coyaima, Tolima department. Unidentified gunmen believed to be common criminals had abducted the ranch owner 12 hours earlier. The criminals reportedly demanded a ransom of USD2.2 million for his release.

**Venezuela**

Local media continue to report an increasing number of kidnap victims being murdered while in captivity. On 10 February school teacher Giovanni Fuentes was found dead in the Catia neighbourhood of Caracas, a few hours after being kidnapped by a local gang. According to the authorities, Fuentes was allegedly killed after he refused to take his abductors to his family home. In a similar incident on 12 February, a taxi driver was found dead on the Caracas – La Guaira highway, after resisting an abduction attempt by a criminal that posed as a passenger.

On 13 February intelligence officer Renny Efren Rojas was killed in the Bello Monte neighbourhood of Caracas, in what authorities believe could be a botched express kidnapping.

National security forces continue to target criminal gangs in Venezuela’s main cities, aiming to reduce the number of kidnappings. On 04 February security forces conducted a major operation against “La Banda del Chino Pedrera” and “El Tren de Aragua”, two of the largest kidnap gangs operating in Maracay and the northeast of the country. Authorities reported that the leaders of both gangs were killed during the operation.

On 03 February the National Police conducted an operation in Caracas to detain Claudio Jimenez alias “El Buñuelo”, one of the most wanted criminals in the country. “El Buñuelo” is allegedly responsible for dozens of kidnappings and around 30 murders, including the kidnapping and murder of a police officer in January 2016.
## Afghanistan

On 16 February unidentified gunmen kidnapped five Afghan Red Cross staff members from a highway in Ghazni province. Following the incident, the aid agency suspended its operations in the province. The five hostages were released unharmed on 19 February, however the perpetrators’ motive remains unknown.

On 11 February an Iranian national was kidnapped in Zaranj in Nimroz province. According to an Afghan security officer, the victim is a truck driver who was transferring goods from Iran to Nimroz province.

## Pakistan

On 12 February unidentified kidnappers abducted the former governor of Afghanistan’s Herat province in Islamabad. Former governor Fazlullah Wahidi arrived in Pakistan to apply for a UK visa, and was kidnapped at a market in a relatively safe, affluent and highly secured area. On 26 February security forces rescued Wahidi in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, however the perpetrators’ identity and motives remain unknown.

While militants based in Pakistan and Afghanistan – or even criminal gangs – are likely to be responsible for the kidnapping, speculative media reports suggest Pakistani or Afghan intelligence agencies may also be involved. Motives to undermine diplomatic relations are likely to underpin intelligence agencies’ potential involvement. Notably, Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence has conducted illegal detentions resembling abductions in the past, particularly targeting journalists.

On 22 February *Pakistan Today* reported a notable rise in the number of express kidnappings in Karachi. Victims have been kidnapped at gunpoint and driven for several hours until their families pay a ransom – in some cases involving ATM cash withdrawals and jewellery. Two gangs are reportedly responsible for such kidnappings and operate in central and west Karachi, however police managed to capture one gang.

## India

Several kidnappings in February targeted businessmen and their dependents in urban areas and for varied ransom demands. Similar victim profiles are commonly reported in India as perpetrators assume high ransoms are likely to be paid. Kidnappers are also often acquainted with victims and familiar with their wealth and daily routines.

On 20 February three kidnappers abducted a businessman’s two-year-old son in Moradabad, located east of New Delhi. A USD15,000 ransom was demanded from the victim’s father. Shortly after police located the victim and arrested the kidnappers, two of whom worked for the victim’s father and the other was a domestic helper in the victim’s household.

On 17 February the 11-year-old son of a businessman was kidnapped in Mumbai for a USD7,300 ransom. The kidnapper was an employee of the victim’s father and later abandoned the victim as police conducted an investigation.

On 15 February the owner of a plastic manufacturing facility near Rajkot was kidnapped from New Delhi airport. The kidnappers lured the victim into a meeting by claiming to offer plastic at a low price. The perpetrators demanded USD30,000 from the victim’s family. The kidnappers released the victim to evade capture by police.

## Philippines / Malaysia

The Philippine National Police-Anti-Kidnapping Group announced that 37 kidnapping cases were recorded and investigated in 2015. However, the official figure is likely to be an underestimate as the overwhelming majority of kidnappings go unreported.

The kidnapping threat faced by the wealthy Chinese-Filipino business community is expected to increase in the run-up to the legislative elections in May, owing to the alleged collusion between corrupt politicians, police and kidnapping groups. According to the Movement for the Restoration of Peace and Order, a local anti-crime group, there has been a surge in the number of kidnapping cases since the end of 2015.

Nevertheless, the kidnap threat to both domestic and foreign nationals remains highest in Basilan, Sulu and Mindanao. On 08 February the militant group Abu Sayyaf released the three-year-old grandson of a Filipino mayor after holding him in captivity for 10 months. It remains unclear whether the demand of USD1.34 million was paid.

Abu Sayyaf militants are still holding five foreign nationals, including a Dutch birdwatcher kidnapped in Tawi-Tawi; a former Italian priest abducted in Zamboanga; two Canadian nationals and one Norwegian national seized from a holiday resort on Samal Island.
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• An interactive simulated incident exercise
• Incident management plan development advice
• Specialist legal advice from partner-level contributors
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• For kidnap and extortion, contribution from a former kidnap victim

Events are being held in global locations throughout the year:

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14 April: Chicago, USA - Kidnap for Ransom & Extortion
19 April: Washington DC, USA - Kidnap for Ransom & Extortion
11 May: Singapore - Maritime Security Threats
24 May: Glasgow, UK - Maritime Security Threats
25 May: Paris, France - Kidnap for Ransom & Extortion
28 June: London, UK - Crisis Management and Communications
Date TBC: Oslo, Norway - Maritime Security Threats

For further information and prices, please contact info@nyainternational.com
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NYA International is a leading global risk and crisis management consultancy. Since 1990 we have helped organisations to maximise opportunities and operate successfully in complex environments around the world. We help our clients to understand the threats and vulnerabilities to their people, assets and international operations, improve their resilience and effectively mitigate and manage a wide range of security-related problems and crises. NYA has one of the largest specialist response teams in the industry and experience of advising on around 80-100 crisis incidents each year.

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