

KIDNAP RESPONSE: IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES FOR AID AGENCIES

Introduction

“One minute we were heading to the airport, happy to be on our way home...next minute we were being bundled into a pick-up truck crowded with gun-toting bandits, AK47’s pointed at our heads, racing off into the unknown.”¹ Almost eighty days later, after difficult and, at times, traumatic negotiations, one of the captives was brought safely home. The other was eventually released four weeks later. In the final analysis, both hostages believed that their captors were not aware beforehand that they were aid workers and simply targeted them because they were foreigners. But, as the facts show, international staff are far from being the most victimised.

Accurate kidnap statistics are notoriously difficult to obtain and any reference to facts and figures has to be taken lightly. Based on published reports and some limited unpublished data, approximately 79 NGO staff worldwide were kidnapped in 2008². This source shows an almost equal split of international and national staff. However, the real figure will be much higher, as the greater majority of kidnaps go unreported and published data is unlikely to accurately represent kidnappings of national staff. For example, other data³ from 2008 indicates 78 NGO staff kidnapped in Afghanistan alone, 71 of whom were national staff. Despite the reporting disparities and lack of data, there is undoubtedly a serious kidnap threat to all humanitarian actors. Prevention measures will undoubtedly mitigate the risk but will not, of course, remove it completely. Aid Agencies therefore need to be ready to deal with the worst-case scenario, so that if things go wrong, management teams are prepared to respond quickly and competently.

Crisis Management Teams

Crisis or incident management plans can provide valuable guidance and ensure that essential actions are not forgotten in the heat of the moment; but what really matters are the people assigned to respond to the incident.

Incident Management Teams will tend to be formed quickly at field level, close to the incident itself. If the incident is very serious (critical) and threatens to disrupt normal operations then a Crisis Management Team will normally convene at HQ level, to support the Incident Management Team. Without a co-ordinated team approach, a critical incident will quickly overwhelm an isolated management team.

Before a crisis descends, individuals assigned to crisis and incident management teams should be hand-picked for their ability to respond calmly and with a clear head in times of crisis. The most senior staff member in the management line may be a wonderful manager in the normal course of events but may not necessarily be the best person to lead a crisis management team. Most people do not like to admit that they find crisis situations challenging. It is therefore incumbent on senior managers to critically assess their staff and themselves as crisis managers and allocate roles accordingly.

There will of course be situations in the field where there is little choice in the composition of the team dealing with a crisis, at least until support arrives. Whether in the field or back at HQ however, the foundations for good crisis management begin

¹ Testimony of ex-hostage and aid worker.

² Risk Statistics 2008, Clements International, www.clements.com

³ Afghan NGO Safety Office (ANSO) Quarterly Data Report Q4 2008 page 6

at the recruitment stage and the process continues throughout the period of employment, with ongoing assessment, crisis management training and support.

Raising The Alarm

Too often, plans for responding to a kidnap start from the point when there is confirmation that the incident has occurred. However, from a management perspective, kidnaps are not always immediately obvious events. They often occur at times and in places where there are no reliable witnesses. Hours or even days can be lost if a disappearance goes unreported and unnoticed.

Most agencies operating in high-risk areas have some kind of movement monitoring system, which will alert management to a possible problem. Such arrangements also need to be complemented by a clear procedure for dealing with a lost contact. This will guide management through the necessary steps to establish what has happened and enable them to either regain contact or identify the problem. Failure to 'check-in' as per an agreed schedule should trigger this process of enquiry, which within a limited timeframe will provide sufficient information for the necessary suppositions and decisions to be made quickly by management.

Kidnaps can only be confirmed as such when there is unambiguous information that the act has been committed. This can be obtained either from a dependable⁴ eyewitness to the incident or more reliably, by contact from the perpetrators themselves, who will need to prove that they do have the hostage. Until then, the abductee is simply a 'missing person'.

This unfortunately provides a sufficient enough 'grey area' for management teams to make their first serious mistake. They may prevaricate and fail to make quick decisions, which can lead to problems if the situation quickly deteriorates. For example, if the kidnappers make first contact by telephone to an unprepared family member, they will not only be shocked and upset; if they discover that the agency knew about this beforehand but failed to inform them at the earliest possible moment, they will be extremely angry. This is likely to bring about a loss of trust and may lead to the family taking matters into their own hands, which is likely to make the situation worse.

Family

If, after enquiries have been made, there are sufficient grounds for assuming that a kidnapping has taken place, the decision to inform family must be taken and acted on quickly.

This raises some questions: How long is a reasonable timeframe for investigating the lost contact? What can be regarded as 'the earliest possible moment' for informing the family? Which family members should you try and contact?

Family Contacts: The first point of reference is the personnel file where the 'Next of Kin' details should be found. If no such details are available, then the relative vulnerability of family members (age, health etc.), their physical location and any time differences must be taken into account when deciding who to contact.

⁴ Eyewitnesses must be treated with caution. Their information may be inaccurate for various reasons or they may provide deliberately misleading information.

The form of contact is also important. Is it possible to notify family in person? If so, who should do it? The traditional approach would be for the most senior manager available to do it face-to-face but that might not be practical or even possible. If the family contact lives in another country, who is best placed to deliver the news? In many countries, the Police are the agency with official responsibility for informing the family, though this does not and should not preclude any approach from the employer.

An appropriate member of CMT should be responsible for overseeing family liaison though should refrain from being the point of contact if possible in order to avoid conflicting priorities when filtering information to be provided. In this regard, families should be advised that there will be certain operational details that it might not be possible to divulge, for operational security reasons. It is also essential to stress the importance of not talking about the situation to the media or anyone outside the immediate family. A final important point to note is that the person speaking to the family should maintain a regular schedule of contacts, even when there is no new information to report.

Informing families of national staff should be slightly less complex as there are fewer options to consider. However, at this stage, whether national or international, families need to be given clear information about the situation: events as you understand them; and actions that have been taken and are being taken to deal with the situation. The family must also be briefed on what to expect in the event of receiving a call from kidnappers. They need to know what to say and what not to say. Maintaining a professional and organized approach will provide reassurance for the family, which is critical in maintaining trust and preventing parallel negotiations from being undertaken by the family.

Families of national staff are more likely to carry out their own investigation and if they are able to make contact with the kidnappers, even their own negotiations. It may not be possible to prevent this and it can be incredibly damaging if not properly handled. Local families can have better contacts and networks and in some cases, they might be able to help. It is important in such circumstances to co-ordinate all activities with the family and to share with them any relevant professional advice which the agency may be receiving.

Lost Contact Enquiries: These should be conducted as thoroughly and as quickly as possible. The process should be completed before nightfall if time permits, as it is better to inform the family on the same day that the person went missing. In psychological terms, discovering such bad news on the following day can cause problems and should be avoided where possible.

In practical terms, it makes sense to check if the family has had any contact, particularly if family members are in the same country. But this should be done carefully in order to avoid alarming or frightening them unnecessarily. The opening line is therefore very important and the caller needs to give due attention to the form of words they use.

If they have had no recent contact, the family will naturally want to know as much information as possible and again, great care must be taken here. It is important at this point not to speculate about what might have happened and instead to remain positive and optimistic. The family will inevitably make their own enquiries, which

can be immensely helpful though it can also create problems later when trying to manage information flow.

Further Priorities

First Contact: Contact from the perpetrators may come at any time, from minutes to months after the abduction and could be in spoken or written form. It is therefore important to be prepared to receive that contact and the priority is to prepare for contact by telephone. Phone contact will provide an opportunity to glean vital information from the kidnappers and should not be wasted.

Consequently, it is not only the immediate family who need to be briefed about what to do if they receive a call from the kidnappers. Every possible recipient of such a call needs to be briefed. The call-in point will depend very much on the kidnappers preferred modus operandi. If they want to achieve dramatic effect and create an emotional response, they may call the family. If they have a no-nonsense approach and want to get down to business quickly, then they are likely to call one of the office numbers or a specific member of staff.

When dealing with that first contact, the most important thing to do is listen and note down the information provided as well as any other details (gender, accent, attitude, coherence, background noises etc.). If it is not provided voluntarily, it is very important to request Proof of Life, not only to determine if the hostage is alive but also to eliminate hoaxers. The best Proof of Life is a live conversation with the hostage, assuming voice recognition. This can be immediate and if allowed, is normally a huge morale boost to hostage and family alike. Failing that, a question that can only be answered by the hostage is also a quick means of obtaining Proof of Life. No matter what form it takes, the proof must be unequivocal, and confirm beyond doubt that the hostage was alive at that moment in time.

The recipient of the first contact should also:

- Be helpful, express concern, agree to pass on messages but be clear that you have no authority to make decisions and need to consult with others who are not all available at the moment.
- Make no offers and do not agree to any demands.
- Ask about welfare of hostages.
- Ask if it is possible to contact them and when they will next call.
- Ask who they are and how it will be possible to identify them when they next call.

A hostage who is alive and well is obviously a fundamental requirement and it is for this reason that the kidnappers must be informed as soon as possible of any serious health problems and medical needs (including full details of the medication required). The hostage is a valuable asset, so it is unlikely that the kidnappers will ignore any serious health warning.

The Communicator: Normally it is preferable to have an intermediary act as the conduit for information between the management team and the kidnappers, who may also have their own intermediary. Generally referred to as the 'communicator', the intermediary should be of a calm nature and articulate in local language. He or she should be seen as a spokesperson only and should have no decision making power. A trusted national staff member is an ideal choice providing that they are not too closely connected with the hostage. Changes in intermediaries can be unnerving for the kidnappers and any rapport and trust that might have been won over the

course of previous conversations may be lost. It is for these reasons that, unless unavoidable, the communicator should remain unchanged for the duration of the negotiation.

Once the communicator is identified and briefed, which is an urgent priority, all phone calls from kidnappers should be routed through that person. If ready in time for the first contact, the person receiving that first phone call should provide the kidnappers with details of the preferred contact point.

Practical Matters: The communicator should have a dedicated phone to use for all contact with the kidnappers and a recording device to record these calls. A second phone may be needed for the communicator to use for contact with members of the CMT. If possible, each CMT member should also have a telephone dedicated to dealing with the incident, in order to create a clear division between routine business and the kidnap response itself.

To ease the functioning of the CMT, a dedicated and lockable meeting room is preferable so that the business of managing the crisis can be separated clearly and securely from routine business. The room should have dedicated phone lines, adequate IT equipment and support as well as sufficient wall space for white boards and wall charts so that all important information can be clearly displayed and logged⁵.

Conclusion

A crucial early objective in managing a kidnap response is to establish a strong position from which to conduct future negotiations. The points above are intended to guide those actions required to achieve this. There are many other important areas which need addressing, such as media management, which it has not been possible to cover in the space available here. For further reading, chapter thirteen of HPNs own GPR8 publication, "Operational Security Management in Violent Environments" (Koenraad Van Brabant), competently deals in some detail with the subject.

⁵ Information from wall charts and white boards must also be captured in electronic format in order to ensure it is not lost when the information needs to be refreshed.