

## **The Rise of Kidnapping in Afghanistan**

Last year in Afghanistan, two Afghan men working for a non-governmental organization (NGO) were taken by unknown insurgents during a community meeting. Thirty days later, after intense negotiations between the NGO, family members, tribal elders and Taliban leaders, the men were released. Though neither suffered major physical trauma, both had been mistreated and were suffering from a variety of injuries and health problems as a result of being beaten and the poor conditions in captivity. During their incarceration, they frequently received death threats and were moved regularly—never knowing whether they were going to be released or simply killed. As a result of this, both suffered from post traumatic stress. They were the lucky ones. Others ... do not survive to tell the tale.

### **Context and Dynamics of the Threat**

Kidnapping is not a new phenomenon in Afghanistan. Commonly used as a bargaining tool for the tribes of the region throughout history, it was not normally used as a means of obtaining money or other material benefits. It would be a mistake to draw too many parallels between the current kidnap-for-ransom trend and the traditional role of kidnapping in inter-tribal disputes. The rise of kidnapping in Afghanistan is, to a large extent, a reflection of global trends.

Tactics of insurgency are spreading and finding root in many contexts where Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs) operate. These groups are learning quickly from each other. Suicide bombing, which was once uncommon in Afghanistan, is a prime example of how tactics of terror proliferate on a global scale.

Not surprisingly, the Taliban have been using kidnapping for political and collateral gain over the past few years and it is now being used, increasingly, to generate revenue. The Taliban have been quoted as saying that they never kidnap for ransom<sup>1</sup>, however there are clear contradictions to this statement in several recent cases where ransom payments have been made. Though there have been multiple demands made in these cases, ransom has clearly been a powerful motivating factor. There may be divisions within and between the AOGs, which can make negotiations particularly difficult, but from the local to the national level, the prospect of large ransom payments makes kidnapping a particularly tempting tactic for the Taliban.

The influence of criminal elements is also an important dynamic. Many criminal gangs are singling out the Afghan civilian population, and families with modest incomes are commonly being targeted. The Taliban make a clear distinction between themselves and the criminals who conduct such activity. However, as we have seen elsewhere in the world, where foreigners and other relatively high-value victims are concerned, criminal gangs are also kidnapping for sale to the highest bidder. Hostages have found themselves passed through several hands, often ending-up with insurgent groups. Afghanistan is no stranger to these tactics. Though the transaction brings in limited income, it is a low-risk option for many criminals, as they do not have to invest as much time and resources in detaining victims and can avoid the exposure which ransom negotiations bring.

## **Recent Trends**

Kidnap statistics are notoriously difficult to collate because most kidnaps are not reported. This is undoubtedly the case when considering the prevalence of kidnapping amongst the general civilian population in Afghanistan. It is a little easier to establish the scale of the problem for the International Community and their local employees, because incidents affecting this group are more likely to be reported.

The Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO) recently published their 2007 quarterly report for the period of July to September<sup>2</sup> which provides information based on reported incidents affecting NGOs. The overall trend for the first three quarters of 2007 shows a significant increase in kidnappings with a total of 82 NGO staff victims and approximately 70% of those being abducted in the period July to September.<sup>3</sup>

The report states that there has been "...a significant escalation in criminal abductions"<sup>4</sup> and in the period January to September 2007, out of a total of 21 NGO staff abducted by criminals, 20 of these staff were taken in the five months between May and September. Comparison of criminal abduction data from the second and third quarters of 2007 shows that the number of NGO staff victims had slightly increased from 9 to 11 whilst the number of incidents had more than doubled, from 4 to 9. Abduction accounted for 14% of all criminal incidents against NGOs between July and September, an increase of 5% from the previous quarter.<sup>5</sup>

In respect to AOGs, an examination of the number of NGO staff victims gives cause for concern. Since the beginning of 2007, ANSO indicates that there has been 57 NGO staff members abducted and 46 of them (80%) were taken in the July to September period. Even when taking into account the statistical anomaly created by the single incident in which 23 South Koreans were abducted, the picture is not a positive one, with a significant increase in the number of kidnap victims and incidents at the hands of AOGs.<sup>6</sup>

ANSO attributes some of the overall increase (criminals and AOGs combined) to "...a number of dynamics including increased AOG migration into areas of NGO operations (especially in the Central and eastern regions), the elevation of kidnapping as a lucrative political and economic tactic and the reluctance of NGOs to acknowledge changes in the security context."<sup>7</sup> ANSO also notes that the significant majority of abductees are Afghan nationals which they perceive to indicate that NGO kidnap prevention measures are generally oriented towards protecting international staff.<sup>8</sup> Although there may be some truth in this, the higher ratio of national staff means that they are significantly more exposed to the kidnap threat. Needless to say, the statistics clearly demonstrate that national NGO staff are particularly vulnerable to being kidnapped and NGOs need to take account of this in their security planning.

## **The Way Forward**

Whether negotiating with Taliban or criminals, the principal aim when dealing with a kidnap incident is the safe return of the victim. Pressure from all directions including the kidnappers, concerned family members and the media, puts members of crisis management teams under great stress and creates an overwhelming sense of urgency. This often results in neglect of the principal aim, flawed decisions and costly mistakes. Crisis managers need to bear in mind that 'safe return' is not necessarily best achieved by striving for an 'early release.'

The key to avoiding these life-threatening problems is to retain the services of an experienced and professional crisis management firm, ensuring that skilled kidnap response experts are available to respond quickly to a threat or incident. These crisis management firms can also be essential in *preventing* an incident through kidnap prevention training and pre-incident advice. Most reputable crisis management firms can be retained in a cost-effective manner through the purchase of “special risk” insurance.”

‘Face-maintenance’<sup>9</sup> is an important part of the negotiation process with the Taliban, as ransom payment is rarely the only demand. Losing face is a huge stigma in Afghan culture and an understanding of the protocol and mechanisms of ‘face-honoring’ and ‘face threatening’<sup>10</sup> is important for effective dialogue. Likewise, traditional conflict mitigation methods should be exploited where possible and in this respect, the role of tribal elders in assisting negotiations is extremely valuable. Such knowledge and experience, which specialist consultants bring, can not only significantly increase the likelihood of a successful outcome but also reduce the chance of being targeted in the future.

Afghanistan is in the grip of a kidnapping boom and all the evidence points to a continuance of this trend for the foreseeable future, as insurgents continue to be encouraged by past successes and more criminals recognize the revenue-earning potential of kidnap-for-ransom. NGOs operating in volatile contexts such as Afghanistan must, at the very least, ensure that their ‘duty of care’ obligations to staff are being met. In order to do this, managers must be satisfied that they have a realistic appreciation of the risks and that prevention and mitigation measures adequately reflect the existing risk environment.

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<sup>1</sup> ANSO Quarterly Data Report (Q.3-07), ANSO, Oct 2007

<sup>2</sup> “Kidnapping on the rise in Helmand”, IWPR, IWPR trainees in Helmand (ARR No. 267, 05-Oct-07)

<sup>3</sup> Data taken from ANSO Quarterly Data Report (Q.3-07), ANSO, Oct 2007, Section 5

<sup>4</sup> ANSO Quarterly Data Report (Q.3-07), ANSO, Oct 2007, Executive Summary, Para 4

<sup>5</sup> Data taken from ANSO Quarterly Data Reports (Q.2.-07: Section 7) & (Q.3-07: Sections 4 & 5), ANSO, July & Oct 2007

<sup>6</sup> Data taken from ANSO Quarterly Data Report (Q.3-07), ANSO, Oct 2007, Sections 3 & 5

<sup>7</sup> ANSO Quarterly Data Report (Q.3-07), ANSO, Oct 2007, Section 3

<sup>8</sup> ANSO Quarterly Data Report (Q.3-07), ANSO, Oct 2007, Section 5

<sup>9,10</sup> Susan Rosenberg. "Face" *Beyond Intractability*. Ed. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, USA. Posted: February 2004