

## Managing Risks Associated With A Kidnap Threat

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Imagine that you are the risk manager of an Aberdeen-based medium-sized oil service company. It's 4.30 p.m. on a Friday afternoon and the telephone rings. You learn that four of your UK-based staff on duty in Nigeria have been kidnapped for ransom. The kidnappers are demanding US\$5 million for the release of the men.

What do you do? What is your priority? What do you tell the families of the hostages? Have you been trained to deal with this sort of incident?

### *26 UK nationals kidnapped in Nigeria in 2006-2007*

The oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria has seen an explosion in the number of foreigners kidnapped for financial or political gain. Seven foreigners were reported kidnapped in Nigeria in 2005. That figure increased to 72 in 2006 and 223 in 2007. This exponential increase has been largely the result of activity by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and other armed militant groups. Twenty six of the hostages were UK nationals.

Of the 295 foreigners kidnapped in 2006 and 2007, five died as a result of injuries sustained during their abduction - including a Briton killed when the kidnappers' boat was attacked by the Nigerian Navy. One Syrian hostage died of illness very shortly after his release.

If you analyse the political, economic and security issues present in the Niger Delta and then look at the terrain, which favours the militants, the conclusion must be that kidnapping will continue.

Nigeria may be a special case but expatriate staff is at risk of kidnapping where judicial and police systems are weak or corrupt, there is a huge disparity between rich and poor and there is political and economic breakdown.

### *Iraq is at the extreme end of the risk spectrum*

The discovery in March 2008 of the bodies of four American contractors kidnapped in Iraq more than a year ago, illustrates the extreme risks that employees and employers are prepared to undertake in search of an extra dollar. Some will argue that Iraq is at the extreme end of the risk spectrum and that the deceased were fully aware of the risks. This may be so, but it will be of no consolation to their families who spent over a year in an agonising limbo and must now endure a painful grieving process. The company too will have expended considerable human, financial and emotional efforts trying to negotiate the release the men. The legal consequences may go on for years.

Meanwhile, somewhere in the UK the families of five Britons kidnapped in Iraq on 27 May 2007 are still awaiting further news of their loved ones. The outlook is not good. More than 300 hundred foreigners have been abducted in Iraq since kidnapping erupted there in April 2004. Of these, 149 have been released but 56 are known to have been killed by their captors and 86 are missing and presumed dead.

### *Better ransomed alive than rescued dead*

Worldwide kidnapping figures are always incomplete because most cases are never reported. Indications are that 20,000 kidnap cases are reported to the authorities annually. But the true figure is two or three times that number. Current kidnap hotspots include Afghanistan, Algeria, Colombia, Haiti, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Mexico, Nigeria, Philippines, Somalia, Venezuela and Yemen. The majority of these kidnaps are settled safely and quietly by the payment of a ransom or some other material concession.

“It is better to be ransomed alive than rescued dead,” an experienced kidnap adviser told me during my training. Quite simply, in many parts of the world the security forces do not have the skill and experience to carry out a raid to free hostages without putting those they are trying to rescue at extreme risk. In many countries, including Venezuela, security forces are involved in some kidnappings. So a payment of a ransom is, in most cases, the lowest-risk option.

### *Many victims sleepwalk into their own kidnaps*

The single biggest factor in kidnap prevention is an acceptance by employees and management that staff is at risk of kidnap in areas where it is prevalent. All preventative actions and procedures stem from this acceptance and a determination to manage the kidnap risk.

Of the 54 kidnap cases handled by Clayton Consultants during 2006 and 2007, a significant number of hostages “sleepwalked into their own kidnap”. Their kidnap was entirely foreseeable and avoidable.

Knowledge of how kidnappers work enables staff to become “kidnap aware”. Most kidnappers will spend time, effort and money carrying out surveillance of a target prior to an attempted abduction. If the surveillance phase indicates that the target is too difficult or too “kidnap aware”, kidnappers will, in most cases, move on to an easier target.

But avoidance techniques depend very much on the local conditions. What may apply in Latin America may not be appropriate in Nigeria. Avoidance training needs to be customised.

### *Kidnap survival requires training*

Staff need to be trained how to survive a kidnap. In a recent case in Nigeria, four Western hostages had not received any training prior to capture. The kidnap lasted almost a month. Throughout the ordeal, the hostages thought they would be killed. Had the men undergone training prior to deployment, they would have been aware that the chances of western hostages being deliberately killed by kidnappers in the Niger Delta were very slim. Lacking this knowledge, the men suffered unnecessary emotional trauma.

A crisis management consultancy with real kidnap experience will help clients customise training for staff. Clayton Consultants recently ran a series of “Avoid and Survive” training seminars for oil and gas clients in Nigeria that included a module on “Kidnap Survival in Nigeria”.

### *Kidnap management should be handled by a crisis management team*

Companies may be surprised to know that frequently the company is the focal point of a kidnap case, not the family or the authorities.

Managing a kidnap is a task best shared by a crisis management team within the company. Chief executive officers who think they can run it alone may be in for a shock or even an admission to hospital because the stresses and duration of the kidnap may defeat them.

There are usually five groups of people who must be managed pro-actively by the crisis management team. These are first and foremost the families of the hostages, the authorities, other employees, the media and lastly the kidnappers.

A crisis management consultancy can help a client formulate a crisis plan to cover all aspects of kidnap management.

### *Simulation exercise key to preparation*

A kidnap simulation will usually be a half-day exercise, often with actors, simulating a three-week kidnap scenario. The simulation gives all interested parties within the organisation “ownership” of the problems and issues involved in the safe resolution of a kidnap incident.

Clayton Consultants’ experience has shown that companies that have already suffered a kidnap are the keenest to ensure that a crisis plan is in place and that a crisis management team is prepared and fully trained.

### *The value of Special Risks insurance*

Special Risks Insurance is the name traditionally given to insurance against kidnap. Cases can go on for weeks, months and sometimes years and are expensive to manage.

Contrary to popular belief, the insurance company does not pay ransoms directly to the kidnappers but will reimburse insureds for losses, including ransoms.

The real value of the insurance is the provision of a highly-experienced kidnap response consultant to advise the policy holder throughout the duration of the incident. In many cases, the consultant has lived and worked in the incident area and speaks the local language.

The consultant will deploy just about anywhere for any nationality of hostage, whereas government agencies such as the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office and U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation are generally limited to deployments for British and American citizens and are also inhibited by political factors.

### *Safe release of a hostage is consultant’s objective*

The consultant’s objective is straightforward: the safe release of the hostage. Catching kidnappers or solving crimes is not part of the consultant’s mission. The consultant will not lead a Special Forces team to rescue the hostages and carry them to safety.

Instead, the consultant will guide the crisis management team through the complex process of negotiating with kidnapers as well as advising on the management of the other “actors” in any incident.

Good Special Risks Insurance policies will also contain preventative services, such as training and crisis planning supplied by the same consultants who will respond to a live incident.

Additionally, it is worth asking any consultant professing to offer “kidnap prevention” services just how many kidnap cases his organisation has managed in the past couple of years. Those with real experience will have no reason to withhold this information.

### *No part of the world is immune*

Kidnapping is an ancient crime and continues to be profitable. No part of the world is immune. Organisations of all shapes and sizes have a responsibility to protect their employees. A kidnap for ransom insurance policy can help prevent and minimise some of the high risks involved in deploying staff to areas where kidnapping is on the local menu.

### *About the author*

Leslie Edwards leads the Clayton Consultants team responsible for resolving kidnap incidents in Africa, Europe and the Middle East. Clayton Consultants, a Triple Canopy company, delivers crisis management consulting services worldwide. Edwards, a former infantry officer in the British Army, has been involved in kidnap resolution for 11 years. He has managed the safe resolution of kidnaps in Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria and several Latin American countries.

Visit [www.claytonconsultants.com](http://www.claytonconsultants.com) to subscribe to the K&R and Extortion Monitor and Nigeria RiskBrief.

*Statistics for kidnaps in Nigeria and Iraq were supplied by Jon Lee of JML Consulting.*