

The Philippines: "Kidnap Capital of Asia"

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Fiscally, geographically and with an eye toward long-term benefits, the Philippines has always been a popular place for foreign businesses to "set up shop."

Unfortunately, a major obstacle for business and social success that has become increasingly prevalent in the Philippines is the crime of kidnapping for ransom. In fact, kidnapping incidents are so common in the Philippines that the country has fast earned the unsavory reputation as being "the kidnap capital of Asia." The Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism describes kidnapping in the country as "...a virtual cottage industry in which little capital and apparently equally little risk can mean millions of pesos in profits."

But in all of Asia, why has the crime of kidnapping become epidemic in the Philippines? Who is performing these crimes and who are their targets?

Who is Doing the Kidnapping?

Kidnap for ransom (K&R) is not a new phenomenon, but it is a problem that has become more and more commonplace all over the world in recent years - and the Philippines is no exception, exhibiting a particularly sharp increase in incidents over the last decade. Companies with operations in the Philippines must be aware that carefully organized regional K&R "gangs" indeed exist and are capable of causing serious damage to the welfare of a company's employees and that company's bottom line.

Despite the fact that the Philippines legally considers kidnapping to be a crime punishable by death, incidents continue to rise, which may cause a number of foreign investors and tourists to consider alternative locations. Concerns intensified under the present administration of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, prompting the President to declare an "all-out war" against kidnapers.

The Philippines struggles as a nation with unemployment and poverty - with nearly 40% of the population currently living under the poverty line. As with other nations around the world with uneven economies, the prevalence of organized crime becomes an outlet to illegally receive large returns in exchange for relatively little effort.

Impoverished regions, as well as conflicts between and among secessionist groups have become breeding grounds of criminal syndicates, many of whom utilize K&R practices to bankroll their operations.

Notably, secessionist Muslim groups, such as the MNLF and the MILF, and splinters and metamorphoses of these groups are known to pursue K&R as a means of raising funds. The Muslim armed group Abu Sayyaf has been involved in kidnapping of foreign tourists for ransom and political statements. The Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed group the New People's Army (NPA) and similar socialist/communist armed groups who continue to oppose the government have likewise conducted kidnappings, though to a lesser extent than the Muslim groups.

A Growing Problem

K&R incidents have increased at an equally steady rate. From 1993 to 2002, a total 2,142 kidnap victims were monitored by the Citizens' Action Against Crime (CAAC) and the Movement for Restoration of Peace and Order (MRPO). These numbers translate to a yearly average of 214 reported kidnap victims that by all accounts seems to be increasing.

Note too that these are the *reported* numbers. The actual number of kidnappings for ransom that take place in the Philippines far exceeds the numbers written up by the authorities because many kidnapping cases are not reported to the police. The main reason for this is that often, the families of the victims fear police involvement may endanger the victims' lives. Many victims' families do not know who to trust in the police force due to the perceived involvement of some policemen in K&R cases. In the last decade, numerous "bad cops" have been pinpointed as among the beneficiaries of the kidnapping trade. There are also reports that kidnap gangs are well connected with big political warlords. Further, most of the kidnap gangs threaten to harm or kill members of the family if the incident is reported to the police.

One disturbing allegation that was brought out to explain the rise in K&R numbers during election periods is the involvement of some local, as well as national, electoral candidates utilizing K&R ransom collections to fund their election campaigns. Police intelligence revealed that some kidnapping incidents in election years 1998 and 2001 were carried out "to fund the campaign of some cash-strapped presidential candidates," and National Chief of Police Hermogenes Ebdane reportedly confirmed these reports. In May of last year, Ebdane himself publicly warned of the possibility of a rise in kidnapping incidents toward the start of the campaign period for the local and national elections to be conducted this year.

In 2002, as K&R incidents occurring in the Philippines were rising on the international news front, a national emergency summit was conducted at which President Arroyo gave Police Chief Ebdane an ultimatum - to neutralize the 21 most active kidnap-for-ransom syndicates in the country within one year.

In June of 2003, Chief Ebdane conceded that he was unlikely to meet the deadline set by the President Arroyo, but reported that 15 major K&R syndicates had been broken up since the "all-out war" was declared. It remains to be seen whether the K&R industry's growth has been slowed at all by the police activity, but based on recent events, it would seem that as quickly as the police topple a major K&R syndicate, another begins to form in its place.

Who Are the Targeted Victims?

In the Philippines, anyone can be a potential kidnap victim - Filipinos and foreigners, wealthy or middle class - as long as he or she presents a promise for a high payout. Often, foreigners of modest means are kidnapped if they work for companies perceived to have "deep pockets" and the willingness to pay for the safe return of employees. Always, the most important factor considered by kidnapers in the selection of a target person is the intended victim's family or affiliate organization and subsequent capacity to pay the ransom in a short period of time. More often than not in the Philippines, the selected victims belong to families in the upper income brackets and are mostly wealthy businessmen.

While there is a wide demographic scope of different types of K&R targets, the group that has been targeted most frequently in the last five to ten years has been Chinese businessmen. This is attributed to the large numbers of Chinese people who adhere to a cultural norm that includes extreme privacy when dealing with family-related issues - meaning that such cases are less often reported to the authorities.

This is not to say that people who are not Chinese businessmen need not worry. Men, women and children who are a part of a wealthy family, or who work for (or are related to someone who works for) an established company are all considered "at risk."

It should be noted that the risk for foreigners is at its highest in the Southern Philippines where the Muslim gangs primarily operate. Foreigners in Metro Manila are relatively safe by comparison. It is actually recommended that visiting foreigners avoid the southern region if possible. There continue to be travel warnings issued by many governments about this region of the Philippines.

The Practice of Kidnapping

In the Philippines, the kidnapping act can be performed by a gang of less than 10 equipped with some basic weapons, a safe house and a get-away vehicle. Typically, a background check of potential victims is carried out to determine assets or the capacity to raise money. A kidnap group initially scouts for a potential victim through an informer

or spotter. An informer or spotter could be a gang member or an outsider whose participation is to locate targets for the group.

Aside from potential victims who exhibit conspicuously lavish lifestyles, there are other pieces of information that flag people as targets for kidnapers. These include significant business transactions (such as expansions and mergers of businesses), real estate transactions (such as the sale of a big land property), and big celebrations or parties where many guests are invited.

After the potential victim has been spotted, the kidnap group conducts a thorough study on his background and his daily routine movements/activities. Customary routes (to work, to school, etc.) taken by the target are observed.

To facilitate the kidnapping of the target victim, a gang member is sometimes made to seek employment with the target victim's family, either as a driver or as a household helper. In coordination with this insider, the group snatches the victim at an opportune time and in a manner that does not invite attention or suspicion from the public.

Increasingly, kidnap gangs in the Philippines have been focusing on children and teenagers (of all national backgrounds) between 5 to 15 years of age studying at private schools. In these cases, the children are seized and, typically, as the getaway car speeds away, a convoy of vehicles follows in a single line, creating temporary traffic as a police-blocking maneuver. The kidnapers then call the child's parents and let their young victim cry for help over the phone and plead to be saved. This is exacerbated by the threat that the child will be killed if the ransom is not settled within the day.

The amount of money asked by the gang is a result of the background research prior to the abduction. If the victim's family can't afford the ransom, they are advised to sell property, including cars and other valuable goods. Before they release their victims upon the payment of the ransom, the victims are induced to divulge the names and relevant information of their classmates, friends and neighbors who are considered to be coming from well-to-do families. The tips provided by the helpless victims then become part of an ongoing cycle.

Be the victim a 75-year-old Chinese businessman, the wife of a local Filipino banker or a five-year-old American ex-pat private school attendee, the bottom line is always money. In each case the victim is regarded as a commodity transaction reinforced by threats.

While Filipino kidnapers may come from the more impoverished parts of the country, it is a mistake to assume that they are not sophisticated. Most gangs have members that may themselves be former police, rebels, security or military officers. These gang

members are professionals who have obtained military, para-military, police or security training, and are trained in combat as well as psychological operations.

Effective pre-incident training, security awareness and the implementation of security measures at home and at work are the best ways to avoid becoming a kidnap-for-ransom victim. Unfortunately, even individuals with security details may prove helpless in the hands of well-equipped, well-trained and highly armed professional kidnapers. In these cases, the victim's families may have a better chance of fighting the criminals by contacting proper and trusted authorities and experienced negotiators for help.