

Global Kidnap for Ransom Update – December 2015



Kidnapping has reached epidemic proportions in Venezuela

Two aid workers abducted in Yemen capital

Unidentified gunmen abduct one Yemeni and one Tunisian employee of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Sana'a...

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South Korean hostage killed in the Philippines

74-year-old South Korean national found dead after being kidnapped by the Abu Sayyaf Group in southern Zamboanga Sibugay province in January...

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Spotlight on Venezuela

Although government secrecy over security strategies prevents an accurate outlook for kidnap for ransom, some official reports show incidents are increasing...

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Kidnap for Ransom Analysis

NYA International statistics covering 2015 including the top ten countries for incidents, regional overview and analysis of trends and developments...

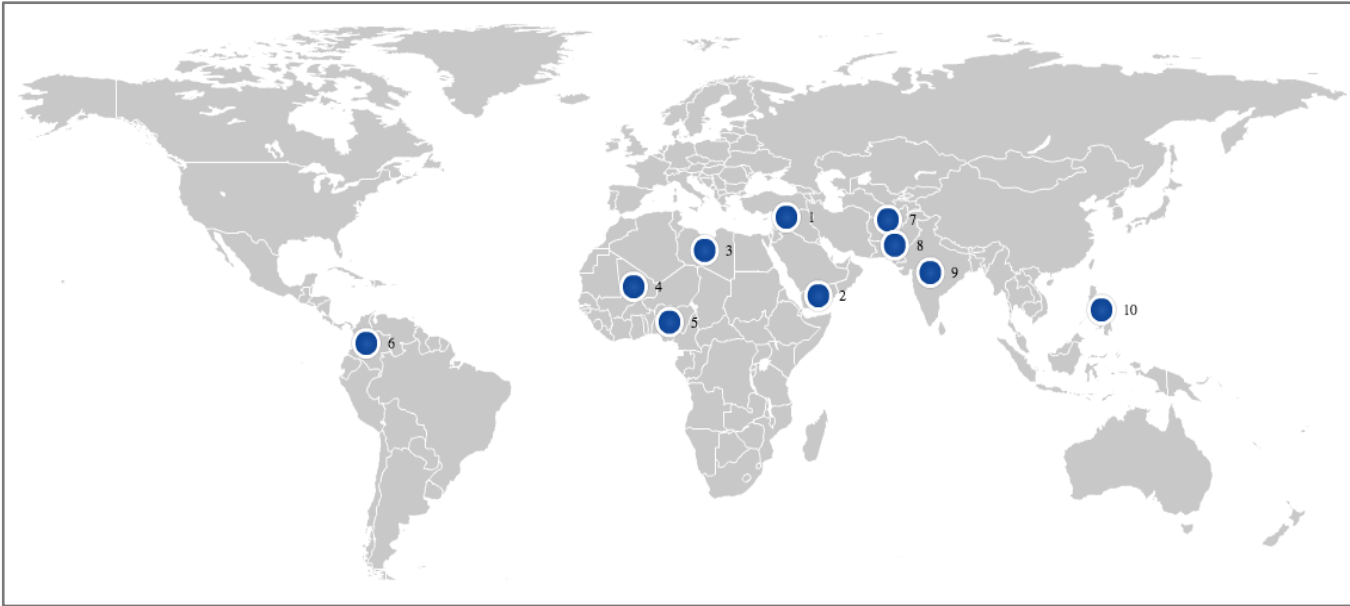
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Company Information

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Kidnap for Ransom Overview



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Top five kidnap countries in 2015

1. Nigeria
2. India
3. US
4. Pakistan
5. Philippines

The above are based on kidnap for ransom incidents recorded in open source news reports and captured in 2015 (see Page 19). 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.

Kidnap for Ransom News

Middle East

Hotspots

- **Syria**
- **Lebanon**
- **Iraq**
- **Yemen**

Syria

On 15 November the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham, affiliates of al-Qaeda, abducted 30 Kurdish civilians in Azaz, a town in northwestern Syria, approximately 30km north of Aleppo. It has been reported that Islamist militant groups in the area are stopping passenger buses travelling between Aleppo to Efrîn in order to kidnap Kurdish civilians.

On 24 November Islamic State (IS) released 10 kidnapped Assyrian Christians held for nine months in northeastern Syria. The group were among over 200 individuals seized over a number of incidents in February 2015 in Hasakeh, Khabur region. The Assyrian Monitor for Human Rights claimed the release was "a result of the tireless efforts and negotiations by the Assyrian Church of the East." Around 100-120 Syrian Christians are believed to still be held captive by IS.

On 10 December IS released a further 25 of the 100 Assyrian Christians that were kidnapped in one incident on 23 February along the Khabur River. The victims were held for a total of 231 days, and were released following payment of a ransom through intermediaries. The released Assyrian Christians were taken to the town of Tall Tamr. On 25 December a further 25 Assyrians, mostly women and children, were also released. Since the mass kidnapping in February the Syrian army, with the support of Assyrian militia, has reclaimed control of the now abandoned Christian settlements in Hasakah. Despite this, it has been reported that over 15,000 Christian families remain at risk amid the current security situation in Syria.

Lebanon

16 Lebanese service personnel held captive by the Nusra Front were exchanged through Qatari intermediaries on 01 December for 13 prisoners held by Lebanese authorities. The personnel were abducted in August 2014 during an incursion by Islamist militants into Aarsal, Lebanon. IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's wife, Saja al-Dulaimi, was reportedly among the prisoners released by authorities.

Iraq

The threat of kidnap is currently elevated in areas of Iraq previously considered safer, including the oil-rich south. This was demonstrated on 16 December, when approximately 100 unidentified gunmen kidnapped at least 26 people from the desert camp of a Qatari hunting party in Layyah, a tribal area in the southeast. According to reports, nine members of Qatar's ruling Al Thani family are among the kidnap victims.

Iraqi police reported nine of the victims, including one Kuwaiti, two Saudi and six Qatari nationals (all

Kidnap for Ransom News

Middle East *continued...*

believed to be servants), escaped their captors undetected and reached the Kuwaiti border shortly after the abduction. The incident bears many similarities to the kidnapping of 16 Turkish workers by a Shia militia in Baghdad in September 2015. Though no group has claimed responsibility, the latest incident is likely motivated by broader political-sectarian divisions rooted in Iraqi Shia militias' opposition to Qatari support for Sunni rebel groups in Syria.

Poor security remains a major issue in Iraq's major cities due to the threat of militant attacks, criminality and kidnappings. On 04 November unidentified militants wearing military uniforms kidnapped a senior oil ministry official in Baghdad's Salikh district. According to a statement by the Armed Forces Baghdad Operations Command, security forces rescued the victim shortly after the abduction and arrested the perpetrators.

Documenting the plight of civilians in areas controlled by IS, the Journalistic Freedoms Observatory (JFO), an Iraq-based NGO, reported 48 media workers and journalists have been kidnapped in Mosul since June 2014. JFO data suggests IS executed at least 13 of the kidnapped media workers. Though some of the victims have reportedly escaped, the fate of the remaining hostages remains unknown.

The threat from IS kidnappings remains extreme in northern Iraq and particularly in areas located north of Baiji. IS conduct regular raids in rural areas with the aim of kidnapping dozens of people. For example in late November 2015, IS militants abducted 36 people in the village of Sadira, located near Shirqat in Salah ad Din province. IS frequently carry out similar kidnappings after accusing locals of supporting the government or co-operating with security forces, however their primary motivation is likely to be financial.

Yemen

On 01 December unidentified perpetrators kidnapped two employees of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) while the pair were travelling to work in Sana'a. One of the victims, a male Yemeni national, was released shortly after the abduction. A female Tunisian national remains in captivity, suggesting the kidnapping was carefully planned and specifically targeted the foreign national. The nature of the incident and the *modus operandi* both suggest the kidnappers are likely tribesmen seeking either political concessions or financial gain.

The latest high-profile kidnapping prompted the ICRC to temporarily suspend all staff movements and evacuate 12 of its 264 foreign employees in Yemen. ICRC's Director-General Yves Daccord said the kidnapping of the Tunisian employee highlighted the extremely fragile situation for humanitarian workers in Yemen.

On 19 November Oman News Agency confirmed in a statement that Shia Houthi rebels had released three US nationals after holding them captive for at least two months in Sana'a. According to the statement, the US Department of State sought the assistance of the Omani authorities, who facilitated the transfer of the three US nationals to Muscat. Though the identities of the released hostages were not disclosed, Yemeni officials who spoke to media suggested two of them worked for the UN.

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Africa

Hotspots

- **North Africa [Libya / Egypt]**
- **Sahel region [Mali / Sudan]**
- **Sub-Saharan Africa [Nigeria]**
- **East Africa [Kenya / Somalia / Uganda]**

North Africa

On 01 November gunmen kidnapped dozens of Tunisian nationals in Tripoli, **Libya**, and demanded the release of Alaeddine Fraj, a Libyan national and suspected militant incarcerated in Tunisia. The hostages were released on 07 November when charges against Fraj were dropped. Fraj, the reported leader of a Libyan militia, had travelled to Tunisia to seek medical treatment when his arrest sparked a round of abductions. Relations between the North African neighbours have become increasingly tense, as Tunisia's government is progressively wary of potential spillovers from Libya's political turmoil. Tunisia faces an increased number of kidnappings of Tunisian nationals living in Libya.

On 03 November gunmen from the Revolutionaries of Tripoli militia kidnapped Mohamad al-Gaddar, the former Minister of Planning of Libya's Tripoli-based government, while visiting his family in Tripoli. The militia is reportedly linked to the Interior Minister of the Tripoli-based government. The Revolutionaries of Tripoli have reportedly been dissolved by the Tripoli-based government, which issued an arrest warrant against the militia's leader Haytham al-Tajouri. The Tripoli-based security and defence commission accused the same group of attacking the headquarters of the General National Congress.

On 08 November two Serbian embassy staff members, Jovica Stepic and Sladjana Stankovic, were abducted when their three-vehicle diplomatic convoy came under fire in Sabratha. Ambassador Oliver Potezica and his family were not injured despite being in the motorcade. The convoy was on its way to the Mediterranean Sea, along a main road where numerous kidnappings have occurred.

On 10 November a Tripoli-based journalist was reportedly kidnapped by four gunmen in Benghazi. Motaz Kraif has worked for Libya al-Ahrar TV, a network formed during the 2011 uprising, and Al Wasat newspaper, known for its anti-Islamist views. The spokesperson for the Libyan Center for Freedom of Press said three journalists received death threats, three were assaulted and eight were kidnapped in the past three months in Libya. Militias have been responsible for more than 30 attacks on Libyan journalists in 2015 and kidnap those who report or criticise them.

On 02 January three children of a prominent local businessman were abducted in broad daylight as they were on their way to school in Surman, near Tripoli. A number of schools were closed the following day in response to the incident.

Sahel Region

On 11 November, two Sudanese nationals were abducted by an Ethiopian militia in Basanda, El

Kidnap for Ransom News

Africa continued...

Gedaref state, **Sudan**. A ransom of SDG150,000 (USD24,460) was demanded prior to release. On 15 November five herders and farmers were kidnapped by Ethiopian gunmen in El Gedaref state, in the areas of Atarab and Tegelein. Many have been kidnapped during the last few months, in particular from the eastern part of the locality and the areas of Khor Saad and Wad Abu Taher. Politicians from the area have declared that Ethiopian militias enjoy protection from Ethiopian authorities. The people of nine villages near the border have left their homes owing to the repeated attacks by Ethiopian gunmen. The villages are now inhabited by relatives of those gunmen.

On 20 November around 10 Islamist militants took 170 people hostage in a terrorist attack on the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako, **Mali**. Reportedly, hostages who could recite verses from the Koran were released. Another 80 were rescued by Malian armed forces as they stormed the hotel and brought the hostage situation to an end. At least 27 people died during the attack.

Sub-Saharan Africa

At least 27 people were kidnapped for ransom in 20 separate incidents in **Nigeria** during the reporting period. Most victims were wealthy or prominent domestic nationals, continuing the trend seen in previous months. In contrast, the number of foreign nationals targeted in Nigeria has reduced markedly over the past few years due in part to reduced militant activity in the Niger Delta, increased awareness by foreign nationals and their employers, and the consequent enhancements in precautions and protection measures.

In one typical incident in Rivers state, the 78-year-old widow of a popular cleric was abducted from her home near the Ngo River in Andoni local government area on 28 November. Witnesses reported seeing 15 gunmen enter the home, assaulting one of the target's daughters before taking the elderly woman away in a waiting speedboat. The kidnappers demanded NGN50 million (USD250,940) ransom for her release, threatening to kill her if it was not paid. The victim's age and health is a factor in the incident, as indicated by the perpetrators leaving behind her daughter during the abduction. Kidnappers regularly target elderly victims likely with the intention of pressuring their families into paying promptly to avoid their suffering or worsening health. There may also be a benefit to kidnappers in obtaining a frail hostage who is less likely to attempt to escape.

Four people kidnapped from a school in Rivers state during the previous reporting period were released on 23 November after 42 days in captivity. The initial ransom demand of NGN50 million (USD250,940) for the release of three teachers and one National Youth Service Corps member was reportedly reduced by 75% over the course of negotiations to NGN12.5 million (USD62,735).

On 18 December Nigeria's information and culture minister Lai Mohammed warned the public that Boko Haram were planning a repeat of the April 2014 mass kidnapping of schoolgirls from Chibok. The minister said the militant group intended to demand a ransom in order to fund their campaign, while also aiming to disrupt the army's plan to defeat the group within their December 2015 timeframe. Originally announced by President Buhari in August, the deadline has already been extended once and has been described as merely a 'guide' by army leaders. The warning was aimed toward schools in remote areas within the reach of the northeastern-based Boko Haram, but also included hotels and other potential targets where members of the public gather. The warning is

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Africa continued...

credible, as the multinational military offensive has reduced the group's territorial control and put pressures on their supply chains.

Human Rights Watch said in a report released on 16 December at least 175 people had been kidnapped for ransom in **DRC** during 2015. Most of the victims were abducted in North Kivu province in the east of the country, and included local inhabitants, domestic and foreign national aid workers and UN contract staff. The NGO called for authorities to create a special police unit to deal with the mounting threat, which has led to the deaths of at least four people and the violent assault of many others during captivity. The heavily armed kidnappers, who usually operate in groups of around a dozen, were thought to be current or former members of militant groups active in the region. Ransoms of USD200-30,000 were sought from hostages' relatives or employers, and a much smaller amount was paid in many cases.

East Africa

During the reporting period there has been two incidents of kidnap for ransom with a total of four victims in **Kenya**. However, the figures are not indicative of actual figures since not all incidents are reported for fear of reprisal from perpetrators. On 14 November three children aged 11, seven and three were abducted from Marindi, Homa Bay County in the west of Kenya. The kidnappers reportedly demanded KES6 million (USD58,587) for the release of the children. The perpetrators issued an 18-hour ultimatum to pay the ransom demand. The incident was reported to the police, although further details have not been made available.

On 28 November there was a reported abduction on a university campus in Kisumu. Although information on the incident is limited, reports have emerged that a 20-year-old University of Nairobi student was abducted. The victim was identified as Mercy Gache, who was abducted after evening classes at the university's Kisumu campus. Her mobile was used to contact her father with a ransom demand shortly after. The phone was later switched off with no reported contact with the perpetrators since.

In **Somalia** the abduction of two aid workers and their driver on 27 December turned suspicion to al-Shabaab militants who operate in the area and have been responsible for the abduction of several aid workers in the past. Only a few hours after taking the hostages to Elbeta village, al-Shabaab released the aid workers. The three victims worked for the NGO HIRDA and were abducted in Tubako, 15km southwest of Bardera in the provincial capital of Gedo. The incident highlights the persistent threat to NGO workers in the region.

On 09 December Islamist militants in eastern **Uganda** reportedly abducted the three children of Christian leader Madengho Badir from their home in Kabuna. Although Christians are considered a significant majority in Uganda, eastern Uganda has witnessed increased persecution by Islamist militants in an attempt to forcefully convert Christians. Among the victims this year was a pastor who was found dead after partaking in a theological debate between Christians and Muslims in eastern Uganda. His body was found the day after the debate, leading to suspicion by a Christian advocacy group that the incidents are part of a wider attempt to force recent Christian converts to return to Islam.

Kidnap for Ransom News

Americas

Hotspots

- **Mexico**
- **Colombia**
- **Venezuela**

Mexico

Mexico's growing problem of mass abduction of migrants was demonstrated over this reporting period. In the five reported incidents over the reporting period, there were 41 victims. However the figure is likely to be significantly higher as many incidents remain unreported due to fear of reprisals or complicity of authorities.

On 01 December a group of migrants were rescued by Mexican security forces after being held captive for six days by a drug cartel. Cartel gunmen abducted the 21 migrants who were hoping to illegally enter the United States, and held them for ransom in Reynosa. According to reports, the cartel demanded ransom money from the migrants' relatives.

Migrants from South and Central America seeking safe passage to the US continue to be at risk of kidnapping in Mexico given their reliance on underground smuggling networks often run by drug cartels, limited knowledge of the region, and their avoidance of law enforcement which means they are far less likely to report incidents.

Colombia

According to statistics released by the national police, the number of kidnappings in Colombia continues to decline as the security situation continues to improve. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) - the largest armed guerrilla groups still active in the country - were reportedly behind 20 and 15 kidnaps respectively in 2015, a drop of 90% compared to the number of incidents registered 10 years ago. On 11 November security forces rescued Ecuadorian businessman Joaquin Vladimir in the border province of Nariño. Vladimir had been abducted by the ELN while leaving a business meeting 37 days earlier. Local media reported the ELN had demanded USD200,000 for his release.

Venezuela

The kidnap threat in Venezuela continues to grow despite government efforts to control the scourge, with kidnap gangs recently targeting well-protected victims such as armed forces personnel or politicians. On 03 December Colonel Richard Manuel Riera Montilla, an officer in the Venezuelan armed forces, was victim of an express kidnapping in Caracas, after being intercepted by gunmen in El Cementerio. Riera was released after his family paid an undisclosed ransom in US dollars. On 09 December two kidnappers were killed during an operation conducted by the National Guard to rescue a kidnapped government official in Anzoátegui.

Kidnap for Ransom News

Americas *continued...*

Other Americas

Kidnap for ransom continues to be a high threat for both domestic and foreign nationals in **Honduras**. On 11 December gunmen in Paraiso kidnapped a group of 11 youths leaving a party in the district of Parque Central. The victims were released later the same day after the kidnappers suspected the police were planning a rescue operation.

Incidents of kidnap for ransom continue to be prevalent in some areas of the **US** with a spectrum of incidents including express kidnappings, virtual kidnappings and tiger kidnappings. There were a total of 14 incidents during the reporting period (all targeting domestic nationals). Half of all incidents were resolved by the payment of a ransom.

On 04 December a group of heavily armed gunmen disguised as law enforcement held a family for ransom in their own home. The gunmen tied the family with zip-ties and demanded USD20,000. Since the ransom could not be met, they proceeded to beat the father with a pipe and stole the family's car.

On 10 December a bank employee was targeted in a tiger kidnapping at gunpoint in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The victim was approached in his driveway and forced into a car. He was then forced to enter the bank as they stole an undisclosed amount of cash.

On 27 November a woman was abducted in San Diego, California, at gunpoint. The victim was in a car park when a man tapped on her doorframe with a gun and ordered her to drive to an ATM. After withdrawing money, the victim was ordered to purchase some items from a liquor store. In a similar case on 14 November, three men abducted a woman in Kansas City, Texas, from her driveway. The victim was also forced to withdraw money from an ATM.

On 13 December, a woman in Houston, Texas, was contacted by scammers who claimed they were holding her brother for ransom. They demanded USD2,000 be wired to an account via Western Union. The payment was unsuccessful but the woman soon discovered the call to be a scam. Virtual kidnappings have risen in the US with the FBI monitoring similar incidents in New York and California.

Kidnap for Ransom News

Asia

Hotspots

- **Afghanistan**
- **Pakistan**
- **India**
- **Philippines**
- **Malaysia**

Afghanistan

Kidnapping incidents are widely underreported in Afghanistan for a variety of reasons. The kidnapping threat in Afghanistan originates from both militant groups demanding political concessions or ransom as well as criminal groups. Incidents during this reporting period suggest Afghan Local Police (ALP) have been implicated in kidnapping women for ransom in Ghazni province. The national government has faced difficulties in bringing the ALP under its control, as it tends to be formed of local militias each with a degree of autonomy. There have been conflicting reports that the perpetrators of the kidnappings were militants rather than police in the restive province.

In neighbouring Zabul province, suspected militants stopped a Kabul-bound bus on 21 November and kidnapped at least 14 people who they identified as belonging to the minority Hazara ethnic group. Both the Taliban and IS have been accused of previous abductions and both Sunni groups discriminate against the largely Shia Hazaras. Hazaras were systematically discriminated against under the predominantly Pashtun Taliban regime. Under similar circumstances, Hazaras were kidnapped in Ghazni in August and February 2015.

During the reporting period, there has been an increase in attacks on Hazaras. The latest kidnapping incident follows the beheading of seven Hazaras on 08 November. The incident sparked protests against the deteriorating security situation in cities across Afghanistan including the capital Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif in the north, as activists claim similar kidnappings have been taking place for months. The threat of increased sectarian violence is one of many security concerns the national government faces.

Pakistan

Journalists in Pakistan have long faced a high threat from kidnapping with both domestic terrorist groups and alleged government intelligence services behind the abductions. On 10 November eight perpetrators abducted journalist Afzal Mughal from his home in Quetta, Balochistan. After 15 hours in captivity the victim was released and claimed he had been interrogated about his communications with banned extremist groups, which were a part of his job. Subsequently some reports suggested Pakistan's Inter-Intelligence Services were behind the brief abduction, seeking to obtain information. In April 2014 an Amnesty International report found that militants and armed wings of political parties in Pakistan have been responsible for targeting journalists. However, the report also stated 'no state actor is more feared by journalists than the ISI.'

Kidnap for Ransom News

Asia *continued...*

The incident incited the Balochistan Union of Journalists to protest against the lack of security for media personnel in the country. The prevalent threat was further exemplified on 22 November when armed men on a motorcycle gunned down TV journalist Hafeezur Rehman. The victim was shot and killed near his home outside Kohat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Senior newspaper journalist Zaman Mehsud was also killed just weeks prior in nearby Tank district, with Pakistani Taliban militants reportedly claiming responsibility for the incident.

Around 06 November at least 10 suspected militants kidnapped two people working for the Special Communication Organisation (SCO) in Diamir district of Gilgit-Baltistan. The SCO is a telecommunications company associated with the Pakistani military and contracted to provide services in the area. While the victims were recovered after 21 days due to negotiations between local government officials and the perpetrators, the kidnap is indicative of general trends. Military personnel and associates are regularly targeted in kidnapping bids and terrorist attacks throughout Pakistan.

India

Kidnap for ransom cases in India continue to be widely reported, with primarily local nationals being targeted. During the reporting period, perpetrators in Bengaluru have been utilising a new modus operandi in attempted abductions. Police arrested a group of four kidnappers, who revealed that they targeted victims by staging road accidents to obtain the business cards of victims. After causing a collision with a target, the perpetrators would negotiate payment for damages and obtain a business card, which the kidnappers would use to identify the victim and their profession to determine a relevant ransom amount. The victim would then be kidnapped and a ransom would be demanded from their relatives.

In one incident reported in early November, the perpetrators collided a bike with a car belonging to the director of an infrastructure company. After taking the victim's business card, the kidnappers had him take the 'injured' to the hospital, and while en-route kidnapped him to demand a USD7,500 ransom that was ultimately paid.

Aside from financially-driven kidnappings, on 01 November approximately 20-30 Maoist rebels kidnapped the son of a pastor in East Godavari district. Local leaders who had established contacts with Maoist groups have attempted to negotiate with the rebels, whose motive remains uncertain. Maoists have been largely known to kidnap victims suspected of colluding with authorities against the rebels, as well as those representing or supporting government bodies. Maoist groups, also known as Naxalites, are communist guerrilla groups seeking to undermine the current government and initiate a new democratic revolution. On 18 November Maoists rebels also kidnapped six local Telangana leaders in Charla, and issued a statement demanding the government stop its intelligence operations against the rebels.

Philippines

In addition to ASG, the New People's Army (NPA) - the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines - is also very active in kidnap for ransom, targeting politicians and security personnel to

Kidnap for Ransom News

Asia *continued...*

further their communist insurgency. On 10 November more than 60 militants from the NPA kidnapped 11 villagers from Toril district in Davao City and released them the next day. It is likely that the brief kidnapping was a warning to the village, as the victims were participating in a government water project in Lipadas River by hauling materials.

On 30 October a 74-year-old South Korean national was found dead after being kidnapped by ASG in southern Zamboanga Sibugay province in January 2015. Following the discovery, on 02 December the South Korean government imposed bans on South Koreans visiting four high-risk areas in Mindanao including Basilan, Sulu, Zamboanga and Tawi-Tawi. South Korean nationals currently in these areas were also advised to leave. Those who defy this ban could face up to one years' imprisonment and up to USD9,000 in fines on their return to South Korea. Amidst a spike in violent crimes against tourists and business personnel visiting and residing in the Philippines, the country is now considered one of the most dangerous countries for South Korean nationals visit. A total of nine South Korean nationals were killed and seven kidnapped in 2015. While many incidents are likely to go unreported due to fear of reprisals, reported incidents show criminal groups particularly target business personnel due to their perceived wealth.

Malaysia

Philippines-based terrorist group ASG remains the most dominant threat in the eastern state of Sabah. After being held for six months, 50-year-old Malaysian restaurant owner Thien Nyuk Fun was released on 08 November following a reported ransom payment of USD637,349. However, 39-year-old patron Bernard Fen, an engineer who was kidnapped together with Nyuk Fun was beheaded. The Philippine military reported that the ASG faction led by Indang Susukan beheaded Fen in the jungle of Butaran Hill on 17 November after ransom negotiations broke down.

In late November, the New Straits Times reported that ASG is strengthening its foothold in Malaysia, with militants being planted in strategic areas of Sabah, ready to carry out kidnap for ransom. The article further revealed that local gangs such as the Knights of the Right Keeper have been aiding ASG by supplying information, including identifying and monitoring potential targets among tourists in Sabah. Members of these local gangs usually have dual citizenship, which could allow them to travel between the Philippines and Malaysia without attracting attention from the authorities. As an estimated 90% of ASG's funding comes from kidnap and extortion activities, the threat in Sabah will remain very high in the short to medium term.

Spotlight On... Venezuela

Since the beginning of the century Venezuela has gradually become the 'capital of crime' in South America, with a murder rate above Colombia and Brazil according to figures reported by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. High levels of poverty and widespread impunity are two of the main reasons behind the high crime rates. Poverty and impunity work in tandem for increasing criminality: poverty creates incentives for criminal behaviour, while impunity provides assurance against punishment to perpetrators. In Venezuela, where 55% of the population is poor, approximately 90% of crimes go unresolved.



Criminality has also been exacerbated by Venezuela's volatile political situation. With the rise of Hugo Chávez to the presidency of Venezuela in 1998, the government started drastic social, economic and political changes that resulted in continuous clashes between pro and anti-government actors. The continued confrontational rhetoric and permanent political tension have exacerbated social violence in the country.

Another reason behind Venezuela's high level of criminality is the lack of state authority in some areas of the country. In recent years armed groups (including pro-government paramilitaries) have proliferated, particularly in parts of the capital Caracas, turning some neighbourhoods into microstates effectively outside government control. The government's response has been highly ambiguous toward some of these armed groups, mainly because some are perceived as political allies in any confrontation with anti-government actors.

As a result Venezuela has become one of the most violent countries in the world. In July 2015 the Public Prosecutor's Office revealed the murder rate for 2014 was 62 per 100,000 inhabitants, one of the highest in the world. Other organisations have provided even more alarming figures. The UN established the rate at 79 per 100,000 inhabitants, while the Venezuelan NGO Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia established the rate at 82 per 100,000 inhabitants for the same period.

Kidnap for ransom

Kidnap for ransom in Venezuela has reached epidemic proportions in the last decade. Criminal gangs now target all social classes and both domestic and foreign nationals. Incidents in Venezuela are primarily financially motivated, with numerous criminal gangs using kidnap for ransom as their main source of income.

Despite the secrecy with which the government deals with the issue of insecurity prevents an accurate portrayal of kidnap for ransom, some official reports show the number of incidents is increasing. The most recent official statistics were provided by the Scientific, Penal and Criminal Investigations Bureau (CICPC) and revealed that 243 incidents were reported over the period of January-November 2015. However these numbers are unlikely to reflect the actual scale of the problem, since an estimated 80% of cases remain unreported for fear of reprisals or police complicity.

Perpetrators of kidnap for ransom increasingly request ransom payments in US dollars or euros due to devaluation of local currency. The regulation of currency exchange centres and low access to foreign currency means victims and their families often struggle to gather ransom money during

Spotlight On... Venezuela

negotiation – a period during which the well-being of the victim is at risk.

Historically kidnappings in Venezuela were perpetrated by organised criminal groups with the required resources to hold victims for extended periods of time. But over the last decade the high level of impunity has created a security vacuum enabling smaller groups to adopt the crime. Whilst extended duration kidnap for ransom cases are still common, the majority of incidents are now short-term *express kidnappings*.

Express kidnappings

Express kidnappings involve the short-term abduction of a victim, during which a person known to the victim (often a family member or colleague) is called to demand an immediate ransom, or the victim is forced to withdraw money from an ATM machine. To ensure the incident remains short in duration, the ransom amount demanded is usually lower than in extended duration incidents (where demands can reach USD2,000,000). Victims are commonly held in a moving vehicle during their captivity and released in an area different to the abduction location. It should be noted some perpetrators are known to use high levels of violence during such attacks.

Up to 80% of all kidnappings in Venezuela are believed to be express kidnappings. Estimates put the number of incidents in Caracas at anywhere between two and six per day, although this may actually be far higher. Criminal groups specialising in express kidnapping have developed in Caracas and are successfully using the crime as a simpler (and cheaper) means of generating revenue than extended duration kidnap for ransom (which typically lasts longer and requires a greater level of logistics). The high number of organisations involved in express kidnapping has hampered police efforts to tackle the scourge.

Virtual kidnappings

Virtual kidnappings often involve perpetrators using private information to target a victim to effectively trick them into paying a ransom without actually carrying out the abduction. While this type of incident is often less lucrative than others, the perpetrators are less likely to be caught and the crime requires a very basic level of logistics – usually only a telephone. Social media or websites are often used to obtain information on the victim in order to orchestrate this crime. The risk of virtual kidnappings in Venezuela has been on the increase since the late 2000s.

Although there are no specific figures regarding virtual kidnapping, in 2013 Argenis Guillen, police director of Los Salias, stressed that out of the 10 incidents of kidnap for ransom reported daily in the region, at least two thirds were cases of virtual kidnapping. In Valencia, the National Anti-Extortion and Kidnappings Commission receives reports of at least three virtual kidnapping cases per day.

Perpetrators and modus operandi

Common criminals are now believed to be the main perpetrators of kidnap for ransom in Venezuela. In the past, Colombian left-wing guerrillas and paramilitaries were believed to be behind the majority of incidents in the country, but the FARC's decision to cease kidnap for ransom in order to facilitate peace negotiations with the Colombian government has drastically reduced the number of incidents in Venezuela's border regions. However, other Colombian criminal groups, some formed by demobilized

Spotlight On... Venezuela

paramilitaries (colloquially referred to as BACRIM) still operate in the area and are known to use kidnap for ransom.

Venezuela's high level of impunity has attracted dozens of small criminal groups to kidnap for ransom. National security forces have increased efforts to reduce the number of such groups across the country, but reports show that these efforts have had little effect. On 04 August security forces reported that 240 people were detained and more than 60 groups were dismantled this year for involvement in kidnap for ransom. Among the currently active groups are Los Teatreros, which operates largely during the night in the east of the capital Caracas, abducting victims leaving theaters, bars, cinemas and nightclubs, and Los Expreseros, which continues to operate despite the arrest of many of its members during a foiled abduction in 2011.

Incarcerated prisoners have also been highly involved in kidnap for ransom by directing criminal activities from within prison walls. Incarcerated leaders of criminal groups continue to direct their organisation's activities after they are sent to prison, often maintaining links to the outside world with illicit mobile phones.

Police corruption has also contributed to the facilitation and proliferation of kidnap for ransom. Increasingly more police officers are accused of running criminal groups that are behind many kidnap for ransom incidents. As a result victims often do not report incidents due to fear of reprisal by corrupt officers. The CICPC has had some success but has so far failed to reduce the number of incidents and also remains afflicted with corruption. In early 2015, 13 CICPC officers were arrested and charged with running a criminal group involved in kidnap for ransom. The officers were accused of abducting a businessman, holding him at a police station and demanding a USD47,000 ransom for his release.

Victim profiles

Individuals of perceived wealth, including business personnel, have traditionally been the principal targets in kidnap for ransom, however those of lower socioeconomic backgrounds are increasingly victims, especially of express kidnapping. Unlike individuals of perceived wealth, these individuals are often unable to afford security measures such as bodyguards, armoured vehicles and residential security, which has made them softer targets.

Foreign nationals are particularly targeted for kidnap for ransom due to the general perception that they are wealthier than the local populace, and that they have rapid access to foreign currency. In early August 2015 John Ralston Pate, a US national lawyer who had been residing in Venezuela for more than 40 years, was stabbed to death at his home in Caracas during a robbery and likely botched abduction.

The high level of impunity has even allowed perpetrators to abduct well-protected targets such as military personnel or politicians. On 03 December Colonel Richard Manuel Riera Montilla, an officer in the Venezuelan armed forces, was targeted in an express kidnapping in Caracas, after being abducted by gunmen in El Cementerio. Riera was released a few hours later, after his family paid a ransom in US dollars.

Children and teenagers are also frequent targets of kidnap for ransom – representing approximately 20% of victims reported to the government between January and June 2014 – as criminals can make

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higher demands and receive faster returns from desperate parents. On 09 September the teenage daughter of Ramón Silva Torcat, Venezuela's Interpol station chief, was kidnapped in Caracas after leaving a club in Las Mercedes. The girl was released after an undisclosed ransom was paid.

High-risk areas

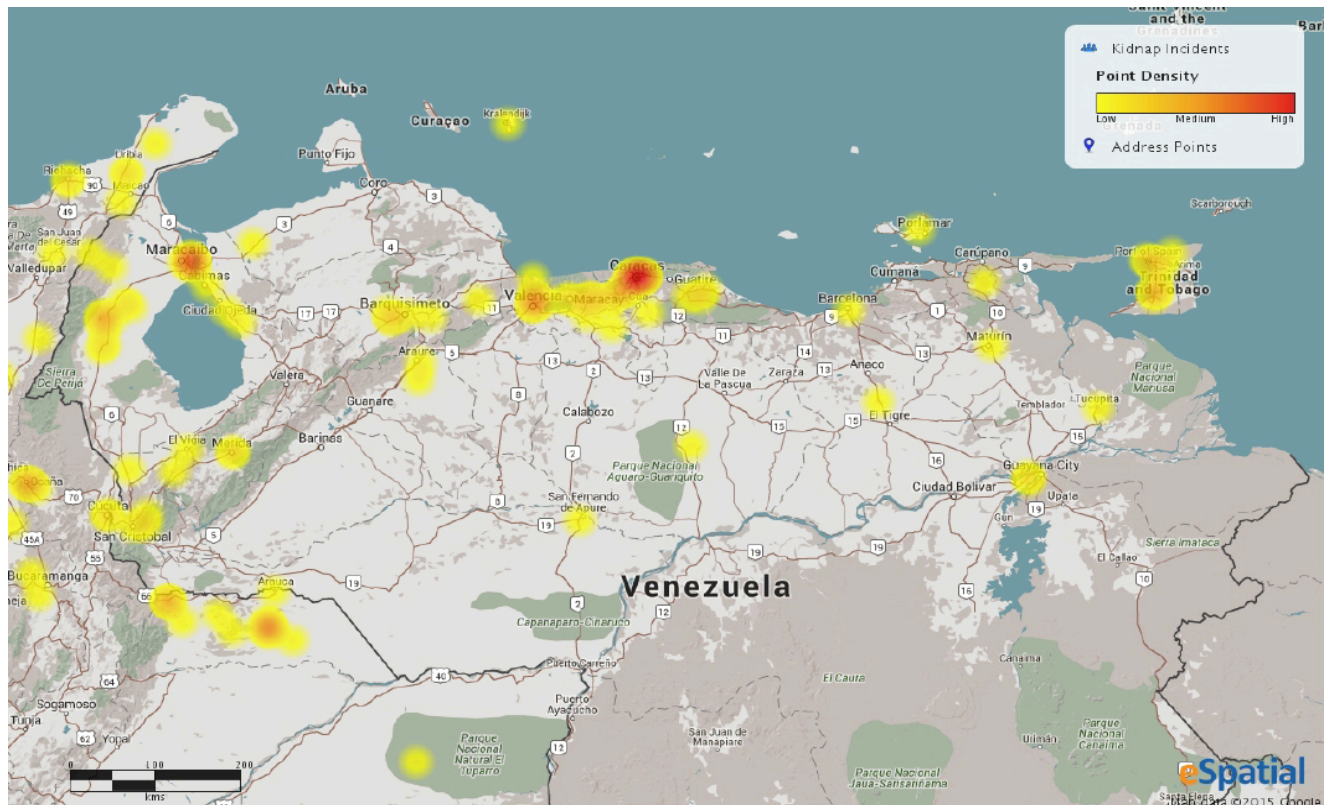


Figure 1: Heatmap showing all kidnap incidents in 2014 and 2015 to date
Source: NYA International

The threat of kidnap for ransom is high throughout Venezuela. The risk is highest in large urban areas such as Caracas, Valencia, Maracaibo and Barquisimeto. Caracas has seen an alarming rise in the number of incidents during the last five years. According to police reports, middle class areas, located in the east side of the city, are the most threatened. Experts have identified a group of middle class neighbourhoods including El Hatillo, Las Mercedes, Prados del Este, Terrazas del Club Hípico, Santa Ines and Santa Rosa de Lima, where the risk is especially high because of the accessibility from dangerous slums. Recently media has reported that express kidnappings are increasingly occurring within impoverished areas such as Cota 905 or Catia in Caracas.

Although the FARC's decision to abandon the use of kidnap for ransom as a source of revenue has reduced the number of cases near the border with Colombia, rural areas in border states such as Apure, Zulia, Táchira and Barinas remain particular hotspots for incidents, mainly due to the action of BACRIM. On 24 August a criminal group connected to kidnap for ransom was dismantled by police in the border area of Táchira.

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Government response

Over the last 15 years the Venezuelan government has implemented more than 20 national security initiatives against criminality, including kidnap for ransom. The latest initiative entered into force on 13 July, named Operation for the Liberation and Protection of the People (OLP). Tackling kidnapping is one of the top priorities of OLP.

More than 67,000 security officers from different police and military units have participated in OLP. The principal aim of the plan is to reclaim areas controlled by armed non-state actors. According to numbers provided by the Ministry of Interior Affairs, by November at least 2,129 people had been detained, 1,322 firearms seized, and 130 criminal groups dismantled as part of the operation. Although the plan has been under scrutiny by media and human rights activists over rumours of extra-judicial killings and illegal detentions, according to a recent survey 78% of Venezuelans support the OLP.

In another initiative, on 19 August President Nicolás Maduro closed the border with Colombia and declared a state of emergency in the states of Táchira, Zulia, Apure and Amazonas following a confrontation between security forces and Colombian smugglers. The decision was followed by the deportation of more than 1,000 Colombian citizens living near the border for alleged involvement in criminal activities. Special measures were implemented in these states, including restrictions on the right to free movement, assembly and protest.

However, despite all efforts, crime rates continue to grow across the country. Various reasons lie beneath the failure of past initiatives in Venezuela. First, security plans have been repressive and have not been complemented by educational initiatives capable of addressing the culture of violence in Venezuelan society. Second, rampant corruption within the police and judicial system hampers their implementation. Lastly, a high-level of impunity continues to make criminality an attractive life for uneducated and impoverished youth.

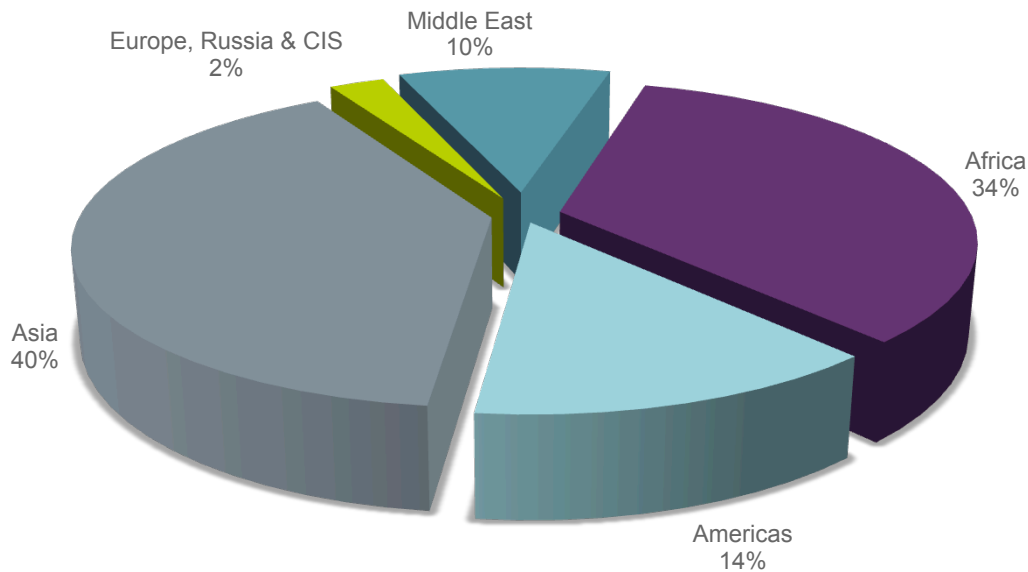
Outlook

The threat of kidnap for ransom in Venezuela is likely to remain high despite government initiatives. Although the number of incidents in the border may continue decreasing while the security situation in Colombia improves, the growth of kidnap for ransom in other areas of the country will ensure overall rates and the threat remain high. The deepening of the economic crisis could continue to damage the general security situation, amid an acute rise of poverty and the worsening food shortages. According to numbers provided by the IMF in October 2015, Venezuela's real gross domestic product is expected to contract 10% for 2015 and 6% for 2016. The victimization of those with perceived wealth is likely to increase as the economic recession worsens.

The deterioration of Venezuela's political situation could also have an impact on security, since a heightening of political tension could reduce cooperation among political actors for implementing security policies. For the first time in 16 years the opposition won a parliament majority during elections held on 06 December. The current ruling coalition has already declared it will not cooperate with the new parliament, which could result in further clashes between both groups and highlights Venezuela's turbulent future.

Kidnap for Ransom Analysis

**Kidnap incidents by region
January - December 2015**



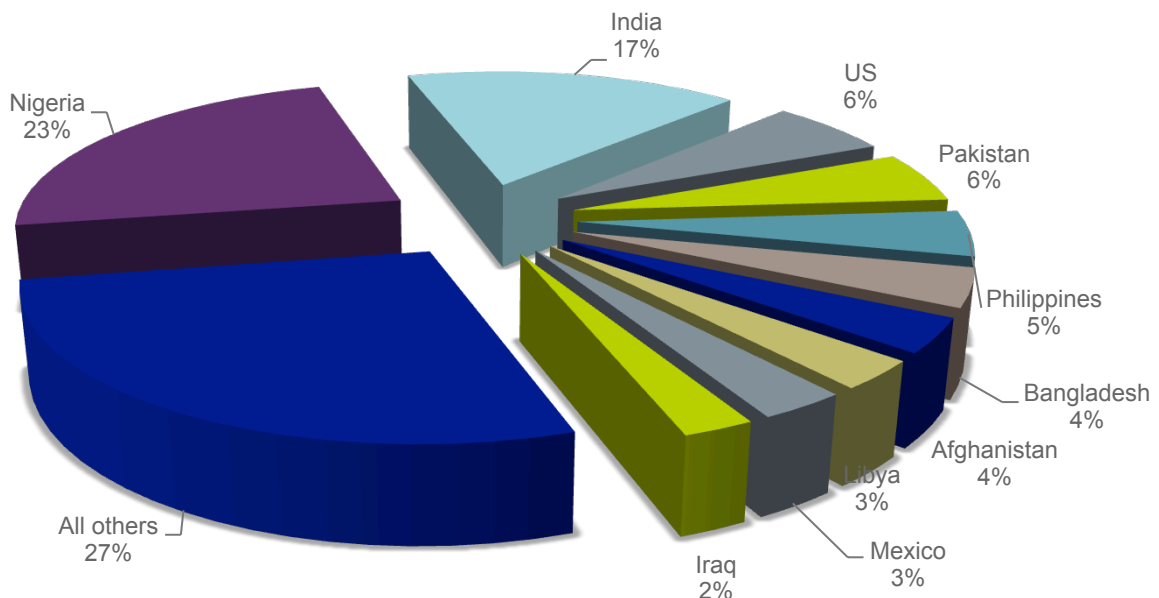
In 2015 the regional distribution of incidents remained similar to 2014, with the last six months continuing the distribution recorded in the first six months. The most notable difference is a slight increased proportion of incidents recorded in Asia, totalling 40% of all incidents throughout the year, compared to 35% of all incidents in 2014, and 31% of all incidents recorded over the first six months of 2015. In contrast, the Americas has seen a slight decreased proportion of incidents, totalling 14% of all incidents throughout the year, compared to 21% of all incidents in 2014, and 19% of all incidents recorded over the first six months of 2015. Africa, the Middle East and Europe, Russia and CIS, all have results consistent with previous years.

Asia's increased proportion of incidents is attributable to the number of incidents recorded in India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. All five of these countries appear in the top ten countries with the highest number of recorded incidents (see Page 19), skewing this result for the Asia region. Alarming, the result also continues a deteriorating trend that has seen Asia's proportion of incidents increase annually. In 2014 the region retained a 35% share of incidents, an increase compared to 26% in 2013. However this trend is attributable to many factors specific to individual Asian countries, and is therefore not an accurate reflection of any region-wide threat. For example, the Islamist militant Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) are active in kidnap for ransom in the Philippines and east Malaysia specifically, but have no known presence in most other areas of the world.

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.

Kidnap for Ransom Analysis

**Kidnap incidents by country
January - December 2015**



In 2015 Nigeria retained the largest proportion (23%) of incidents globally, an increase on the 15% recorded in 2014. This is despite a reported reduction in Islamist militant activity in the Niger Delta, historically a high-risk area for kidnap for ransom, suggesting that criminal organisations are responsible for the continued high number of incidents (see Page 6).

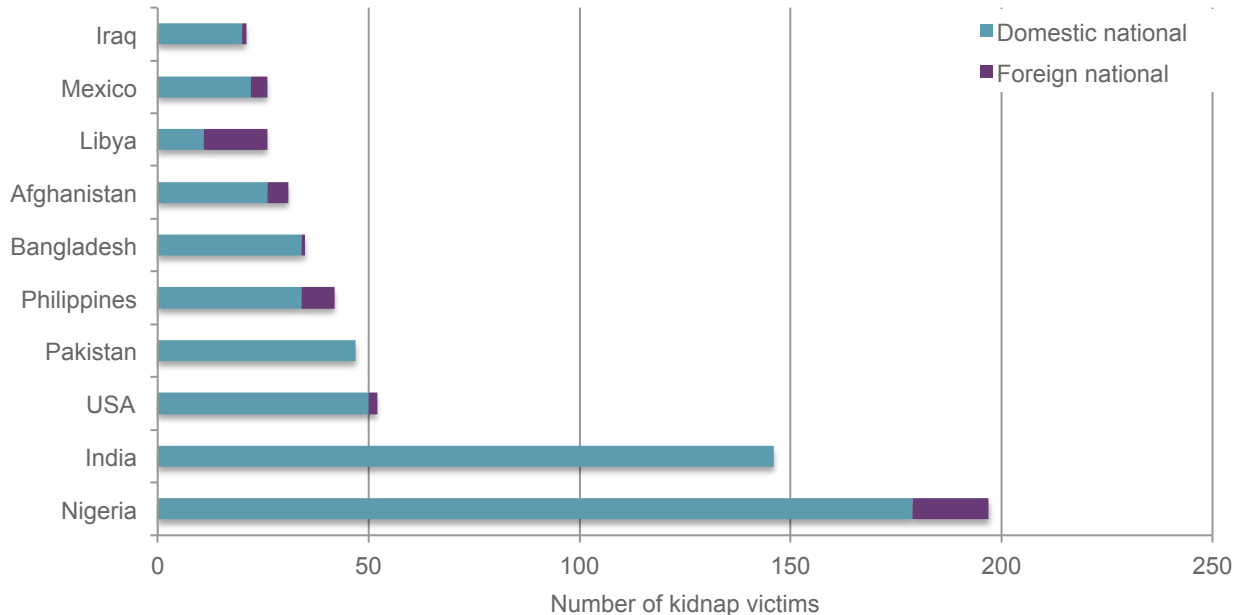
India's proportion of incidents also increased in 2015, compared to the 11% recorded in 2014. High numbers of abductions perpetrated by Maoist rebels, criminal groups and amateur criminals have all contributed to this result.

The US appears in the top ten incidents by country for the first time this year, with 6% of globally reported kidnap for ransom incidents. Although extended duration incidents are rare in the US, express kidnappings, virtual kidnappings and tiger kidnappings are all prevalent. However, despite its position adjacent to Pakistan (also with 6%), the risk of kidnap for ransom is significantly lower. The large majority of incidents in the US are committed as part of robberies by street criminals, and the threat of abduction by organised criminal groups or Islamist militants is non-existent compared to the threat seen in Pakistan.

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Kidnap for Ransom Analysis

**Comparison of domestic and foreign national victims
January – December 2015**



In nine of the top 10 countries for incidents of kidnap for ransom, domestic nationals comprised the largest proportion of victims over foreign nationals. However this does not necessarily indicate a reduced level of risk to foreign nationals or visitors to these countries. For example, in areas of the Philippines regularly frequented by foreign nationals (including both business travellers and tourists), visitors are afforded a greater level of protection by law enforcement or private security. However outside of these areas the risk to foreign nationals can be greater than to domestic nationals, as Islamist militant groups proactively target foreign nationals as they hold a perceived higher value.

One obvious exception to this trend is Libya, which has seen an almost even number of abductions of foreign nationals as domestic nationals. This reflects the Libya's unique and ailing domestic security situation as a result of civil war. Despite the risk, many foreign national journalists, diplomatic staff, security companies and business persons are present in the country, contributing to the high number of foreign nationals targeted. Moreover, the country contains a complex multitude of criminal groups and Islamist extremist groups, all of whom are active in kidnap for ransom to varying degree.

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Incident Management Training Workshops

Incident Management Training Workshops

NYA's one-day incident management workshops provide intensive training on pre-incident planning and response, with separate workshops for Kidnap and Piracy in West Africa, and Kidnap for Ransom and Extortion, with dates available throughout 2016 in the US, UK and Europe.

The agenda includes:

- An overview of the global risk
- An interactive simulated incident exercise
- Incident management plan development advice
- Specialist legal advice
- Incident prevention and preparedness guidelines
- Discussion from a former kidnap victim

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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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