

Global Kidnapping & Ransom Crisis
Column on The Crisis Itself and How to Avoid Being a Target
By John Rose, President, Travel Guard Business Travel Services

THE CRISIS OF GLOBAL KIDNAPPINGS

There's no getting around it. No soft way of saying it. Your traveling employees and expatriates, especially your top level executives, are in danger in many emerging corners of the world. They are at risk of being abducted, in what literally seems to be a global epidemic of KRE - kidnapping for ransom and extortion. In some parts of the world, they can have violent—even fatal—consequences.

And, with the number of individuals traveling throughout Asia, South and Central America, the Middle East, and Africa increasing dramatically, this threat becomes that much greater. The number of U.S. citizens traveling to these more volatile areas of the world grew a whopping 47 percent from 2000 to 2009 - reaching 12 million a year, according to the U.S. Commerce Department's International Trade Administration.

GEOGRAPHIC TRENDS AND NUMBERS

There are an estimated 15,000-20,000 kidnap, detentions, and extortions that take place each year globally, according to NYA International, a London-based kidnap and extortion response consultancy. In reality, the number is probably significantly higher, as it's estimated that only about 35 percent of all kidnappings worldwide are reported to the authorities, with about half of these taking place in Latin America.

Mexico, for example, has one of the highest kidnapping rates in the world, with over 1,200 incidents reported each year, according to proprietary data from Travel Guard, a Chartis company and worldwide leader in travel insurance and assistance plans. Caracas, Venezuela, another example, has become one of the most dangerous cities in Latin America. It has seen a large increase in abductions by skilled professionals who make more affordable ransom demands – enabling them to stay under the radar, according to Clayton Consultants, a Reston, VA. based crisis management security consultancy.

Not too far away from Latin America is Haiti, which was considered the most dangerous country in the world for kidnappings in 2007, also according to Clayton. Although the situation is not as dire now, the aftermath of last year's devastating earthquake and continued rampant poverty make those who work for international aid groups most vulnerable.

Heading over to the Middle East and Asia, countries like Afghanistan, Yemen, Pakistan, Indonesia, India, and Thailand are particularly dangerous for kidnappings, either for political reasons or more often for ransom. In Africa, close to 1,000 abductions were reported in 2009 in Nigeria alone.

In Eastern Europe, Russia remains a dangerous place to conduct business, with foreigners targeted by the gangster syndicates for kidnappings and extortion. Executives have been lured to Moscow or St. Petersburg under the guise of doing a business deal and then abducted. Even in Western Europe, in Spain, express kidnappings have doubled to over 100 a year, based on Clayton information.

THE REASONS

There are several reasons fueling this worldwide crisis. The economic crisis has spiraled upward, particularly over the last two years, causing more desperation and a rise in crime in general as a way to earn a living. Also, with the crackdown on the drug cartels in Latin America, these career criminals have instead turned to organized kidnappings as a way to make money. Unfortunately, these particular abductions can sometimes end in death for the victims, as these former drug kingpins are accustomed to murder as a way of life.

In addition, in many poorer countries, robbing a store or bank does not result in a lot of cash since these businesses often don't earn a great deal of money. Kidnapping can provide a more lucrative payout to these criminals who want a quick infusion of cash with little risk to themselves and a less likely chance of being apprehended by the authorities.

TYPES OF KIDNAPPINGS

There are several types and scenarios of kidnappings. Roughly half are politically motivated and the other half is strictly for money. Depending upon the country and origin of the kidnapers, they can both be equally deadly.

There are traditional kidnappings, where the victim is taken to a location and kept prisoner until the ransom is paid, the individual is rescued, or other demands are met. Another kind of growing scenario is called express kidnappings. Criminals abduct victims and keep that person overnight. They are driven to ATM machines where they are forced at gunpoint to take out the maximum amount of money allotted in one day, and then do the same thing the next day. They are usually released unharmed the next day.

INDUSTRIES MOST AT RISK

Some of the industries most vulnerable to having their employees kidnapped overseas are oil and gas, high-tech, construction, mining, academia, journalism, and non-profit NGOs (non-governmental organizations, such as Doctors without Borders). Employees in these industries need to be particularly careful since they are working in emerging Third World nations where poverty, political strife, and government corruption are rampant.

HOW TO PROTECT YOUR EMPLOYEES

Given all of the reasons and scenarios just described, it is more important than ever that your employees take many precautions. Whether your company is in one of these industries or not, your employees traveling for business must arm themselves with knowledge in advance of their trips to avoid being targets of kidnapers. Here are some recommendations to help safeguard your most valuable commodity - your employees:

-- DO THE HOMEWORK

Make sure that your business travelers thoroughly research the city, country, and region to which they are traveling before they get there. Information such as travel alerts, terrorism threats, street crime, and other problems to be aware of in different cities around the world can be found on websites such as the U.S. Department of State (www.state.gov) and the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office (www.fco.gov.uk) where travelers can find the passport and visa requirements for any country; gather information on sanitary conditions in a certain area; and those renting cars can find country-specific traffic laws. Your traveling employees will also need to understand how the local police departments work.

Have your travelers and expatriates register online with the U.S. Embassy in the country in which they'll be staying. In the event of a nationwide emergency, U.S. officials will know how to locate and assist getting these employees out of the country.

-- DON'T OVERLOOK THE AIRPORT

Believe it or not, the threat of a kidnapping can take place as soon as your travelers arrive at an overseas airport. Kidnappers work in large groups that begin targeting victims upon arrival. Members of those circles often include local airport employees and others who are known as "spotters" (their job is to spot potential victims).

Your travelers should have a name and photo of the driver who will be picking them up. It is very easy for "spotters" at airports to take a photo of a traveler's business card with a cell phone. They can then quickly (and without anyone even noticing) put that individual's name and company logo on a sign and hand it over to another member of a kidnapping ring – who will act as a driver waiting for a business traveler. If your travelers are hiring a driver at the airport, make sure your company has background on that driver and his company in advance of the trip. Sometimes, drivers may be involved with kidnappings and your employees would not even realize it until it is too late.

I also recommend that your travelers never have their business card and/or luggage tag with their name dangling from the outside of a suitcase or carry-on item I also advise employees to leave the fancy, high-end carry-on bags, suitcases, and purses at home. These will make them stand out.

-- BLEND...AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

In addition to leaving the pricey luggage and handbags at home, forgo the high-end jewelry. This includes watches, necklaces, engagement rings, earrings and bracelets. All of these items make you appear wealthy and stand out – particularly in far-flung, poorer regions of the world where anything out of the ordinary will attract the attention of criminals on the prowl. Your employees would want to dress down, wear simple colors, and be as nondescript as possible. This frame of mind should start once they arrive at the airport and continue throughout their trips.

In addition, have your travelers leave their fully-loaded laptops at home. They should travel with "vanilla" laptops – which don't contain proprietary corporate or export-controlled information. Sometimes, individuals are kidnapped just for the value of the data stored on their computers.

Your international travelers should also blend in with the local customs. If the locals go to the market on Saturdays, your travelers should go at the same time. The same thing is true with eating out. If dinner time is around 8 pm, your employees should adjust their personal dinners and business dinners and be sure to eat at the same time.

-- VARY THE ROUTINE

This is especially important for your expatriates who will be spending a longer amount of time overseas. It is much more difficult for an abductor to target your expatriate employees if they are not at the same place at the same time each day. They should vary when they do their grocery shopping and other errands. They should try to leave at different times for work each morning and come home at a slightly different time each evening.

-- PLAN THE HOTEL ROOM CAREFULLY

Kidnappings can occur anywhere, even in a seemingly harmless and safe hotel setting. For this reason, steps need to be taken to make a kidnapping as difficult as

possible to pull off. Travelers should not accept rooms next to exits; it becomes too easy for a kidnapper and victim to leave quickly down a staircase without attracting any attention. Ideally, your employees should stay in a hotel room between the third floor and sixth floor. Rooms with ground-floor access can be more dangerous and obviously risky, as a kidnapper has easy access.

- -PURCHASE KRE INSURANCE

Because law enforcement is so corrupt in many Third World nations, the authorities may actually be “in” on the kidnapping. This means that there is even less chance of apprehending these criminals and absolutely no chance of cooperation from the police. In order to assist in these instances, most KRE insurance products today provide the services of crisis and risk management consultancy firms that can offer incident response, security consulting and training to employees traveling or located worldwide. Most consultancy firms can provide assistance not only during a KRE situation such as that outlined above, but can also train employees and help develop crisis response teams so everyone is prepared if a KRE were to occur.

By working with a company that offers global risk management solutions, you can protect your operations and employees 24/7. Security services can range from providing advisory information on business travel destinations to deploying on-the-ground teams to ensure the safe evacuation of travelers. Also, having an online travel management system that gives your organization the ability to track and manage employee travel makes it easy to identify the number of employees traveling in a specific region and contact them immediately if there is a crisis.

By following these tips and always being aware of their surroundings, your employees will help keep themselves as safe as possible when venturing to all corners of the globe.

John Rose, president of Travel Guard Business Travel Services, is a former program director for the Department of Defense in Europe. Premier Assist is a medical, security, and personal assistance program designed by Travel Guard, Inc., a Chartis company, for international business travelers, expatriates, and students traveling overseas. Rose has also served in the U.S. Marine Corps. Through his professional and military experience, Rose has visited more than 97 countries and lived on three continents.

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