



by John Rose

## THE GLOBAL KIDNAPPING EPIDEMIC

There's no getting around it: traveling employees and expatriates, especially top-level executives, are in danger of being abducted in many emerging corners of the world. In some locations, kidnapping can have violent—even fatal—consequences, particularly with the rise in the number of individuals traveling throughout Asia, South and Central America, the Middle East and Africa. The number of U.S. citizens traveling to these more volatile areas of the world grew a whopping 47% from 2000 to 2009—reaching 12 million a year, according to the U.S. Commerce Department's International Trade Administration.

There are an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 kidnappings, 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 is estimated that only about 35% 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 more than 1,200 incidents reported each year, a number that includes both foreigners and locals. With the crackdown on the drug cartels in Latin America, these career criminals have 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. 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 crisis management security consultancy.

In the Middle East and Asia, countries like Afghanistan, Yemen, Pakistan, Indonesia, India and Thailand are abduction hot spots, either for political reasons or more often for ransom. In Africa, close to 1,000 abductions

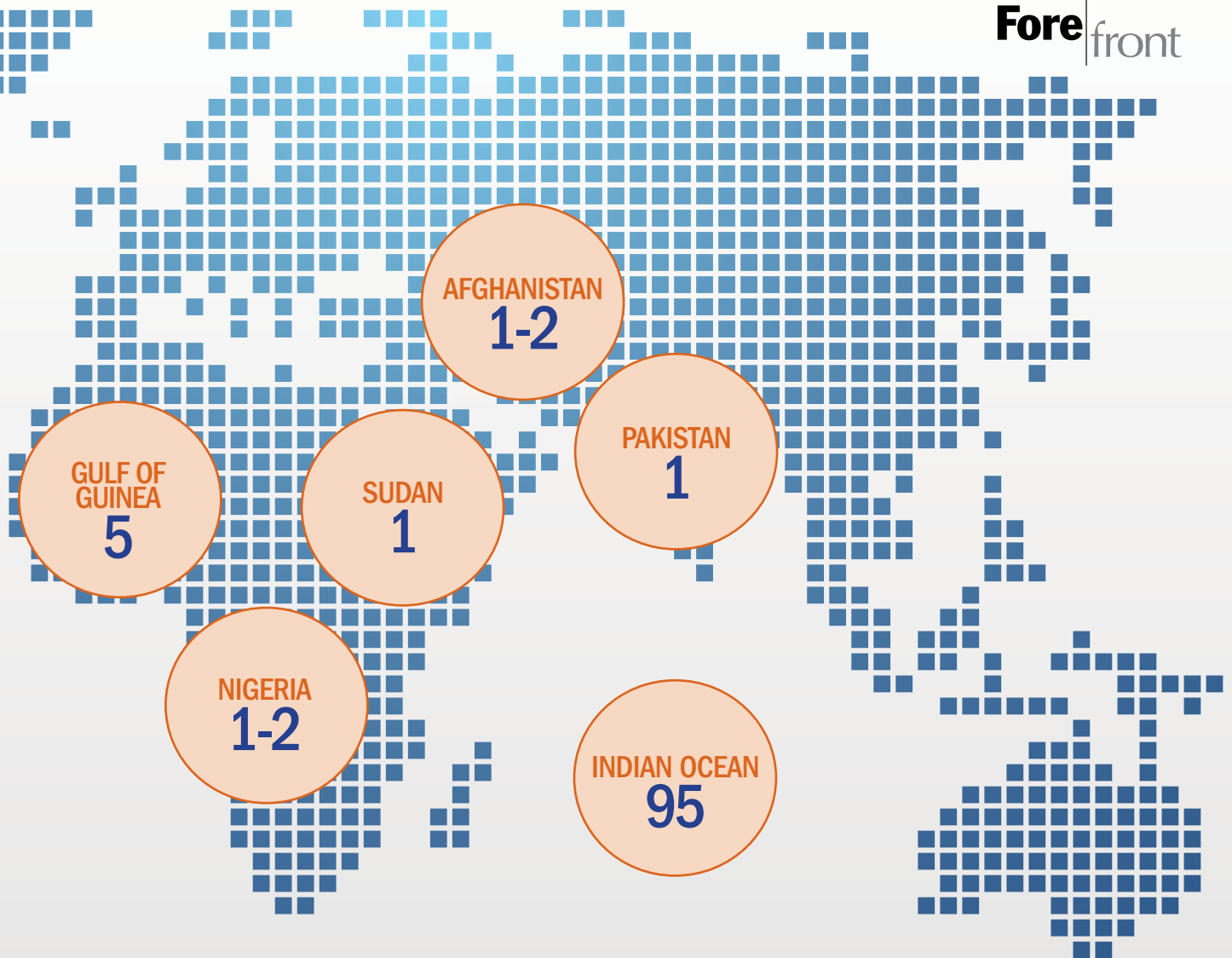
were reported in Nigeria alone in 2009.

In Eastern Europe, Russia remains a dangerous place for business travel, with foreigners targeted by the country's gangster syndicates. Executives have been lured to Moscow or St. Petersburg under the guise of business deals only to find themselves abducted.

The map above shows the estimated number of foreigners taken captive each month, according to AKE's quarterly kidnap and ransom report. The following are ways employees can protect themselves abroad.

### DON'T OVERLOOK THE AIRPORT

Believe it or not, the threat of a kidnapping can take place as soon as travelers arrive at



an overseas airport. And, it can happen in an instant. Kidnappers work in large groups that begin targeting victims upon arrival. Members of those circles often include local airport employees and others known as “spotters” whose job is to identify potential victims.

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 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. If your travelers are hiring a driver at the airport, make sure your company has background on the driver and the car service before the trip.

#### BLEND IN AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

Your employees should 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 trip.

In addition, travelers should leave their fully loaded laptops at home. They should travel with “vanilla” laptops, which do not contain proprietary corporate or export-controlled information. Sometimes, individuals are kidnapped just for the value of the data stored on their computers.

International travelers should also blend in with the local customs. If the locals go to the market on Saturdays, travelers should go at the same time. The same thing is true with eating out and other activities.

#### PURCHASE KIDNAP AND RANSOM INSURANCE

Because law enforcement is so corrupt in many developing nations, there is little chance of apprehending these criminals and absolutely no chance of cooperation from the police. In order to assist in these instances, most kidnap and ransom insurance provides crisis and risk management consulting on incident response, security and training to employees traveling abroad. 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.*