

# S-RM



## Global Kidnap Bulletin

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## 1. United States

Recently released annual crime statistics for 2015 indicate that there was a 1.7 percent increase in violent crime in the US. Homicides in the country's ten largest cities increased by more than 11 percent on average last year, where Washington DC and Baltimore accounted for approximately 50 percent of the country's total increase in reported murders. Nevertheless, overall crime throughout the country decreased by four percent in 2015, lowering crime rates to less than half of recorded incidents in 1990. This illustrates a continuing long-term trend of decreased crime in the country.

## 2. Colombia

In early April, the Colombian military announced future plans to focus its operations on combating organised crime, as well as to adopt general policing functions across the country. This announcement comes amid ongoing negotiations between the government and the country's two largest militant groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Thus far, the Colombian military has been primarily engaged in protracted conflicts with these groups, as well as in general border security operations. In a post-conflict scenario, the military would likely assume policing functions in rural parts of the country. The Colombian police have been criticised for not effectively patrolling outside of urban centres. Police officers also largely lack the requisite training and skills to combat some of Colombia's most sophisticated organised crime groups, such as Los Urabeños.

## 3. Argentina

Between 20 and 31 March, there were 16 reported express kidnappings in the capital's metropolitan area, most of which occurred in the southern and western suburbs. Local reports have further indicated that there are two express kidnappings in the city per day. In response, authorities carried out a series of 12 raids in the city and arrested seven suspects. This recent spate of incidents comes off the back of a significant increase in kidnappings across the country. Since assuming office in November 2015, President Mauricio Macri has focused on combating large organised crime and drug-trafficking groups. This focus is now likely to expand to include operations against small kidnap gangs.

## 4. Angola

On 29 March, a Lebanese-Belgian businessman was kidnapped in the capital, Luanda. He was released three days later. Although the kidnappers demanded a USD 500,000 ransom to secure his release, it remains unconfirmed whether the ransom was paid. While this incident marks a significant development, it is not assessed to be indicative of a growing kidnapping threat in the country, specifically with regard to travellers. However, there have been several kidnapping incidents involving Lebanese nationals in recent years, with two individuals kidnapped in Luanda in 2013. The targeted individuals all had a long term presence in the country, making their movements more susceptible to surveillance and capture.

## 5. Gulf of Guinea

Although piracy in the region is not a new phenomenon, in recent months, there has been an increase in kidnappings associated with pirate attacks. On 11 April, six Turkish members of a cargo vessel's crew were kidnapped by pirates approximately 180km from Nigeria's coast. Furthermore, on 5 March, four crew members were kidnapped by pirates from a chemical tanker operating approximately 60km off of Nigeria's Bonny Island. The individuals were released on 30 March, but it remains unclear whether a ransom was paid. Amid the low global oil price and its impact on black market oil, the increase in kidnap for ransom attacks likely speaks to a tactical shift by Gulf-based pirates eager to maintain their revenue channels.

## 6. Libya

On 19 February, two Serbian embassy staff members were reportedly killed in a US air strike on a training camp operated by the Islamic State (IS). The two embassy employees, Sladjana Stankovic and Jovica Stepic, were seized by militants near Sabratha in western Libya in November 2015, when their convoy came under fire while travelling to Tunisia. At least 50 people were reportedly killed in the US air strike, which took place approximately 800 meters from the site where Stankovic and Stepic had been kidnapped. The proximity of the IS training site to the location of the kidnapping suggests that the victims were held at the location for the duration of their captivity.

## 7. Iraq

On 18 January, three US contractors were kidnapped by Shi'a militia in Baghdad's Dora neighbourhood, in the first kidnapping of US citizens in Iraq since 2011. The three were subsequently rescued by Iraqi security forces in mid-February 2016. The motivation behind the kidnappings was reportedly financial; although no ransom demands were disclosed. The incident is indicative of the impunity with which Shi'a militias are able to operate in government-controlled areas in Iraq. The kidnappings also come at a time in which Shi'a militias in Iraq are capitalising on their contribution to military operations against the IS militant group to demand political concessions from the central administration in Baghdad. As such, while financial motivations likely play a role, such kidnappings are also likely designed to apply further pressure on the Iraqi government.

## 8. Russia

On 21 March, three Russian nationals were kidnapped by a criminal gang in St. Petersburg. The gang, reportedly dressed in special forces uniform, held the victims hostage in an apartment building in the city. The victims were forced to sign documents to sell their vehicles worth USD 37,000. The perpetrators also seized USD 1,000 and cellular phones from the victims, in addition to demanding approximately USD 30,000 on account of a non-existent debt. On 22 March, Russian security forces rescued the hostages and arrested the kidnappers, who are being charged with kidnapping, extortion and robbery.

## 9. Malaysia

On 1 April, four Malaysian sailors were kidnapped from a vessel sailing in waters off the coast of Semporna, Sabah state. According to reports, the boat was intercepted by masked gunmen near Ligitan Island. Authorities suspect that the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), a militant Islamist organisation based in The Philippines, is behind the incident. The group has a history of kidnapping Malaysians and foreigners off the coast of Sabah state. Furthermore, the assailants escaped in the direction of the southern Philippines where the ASG has a known presence. Despite heightened security along the east coast of Sabah, which includes a dusk to dawn curfew, kidnapping incidents occur frequently in the region.

## 10. Philippines

In late April, the Abu Sayyaf Group beheaded John Ridsdel, one of two Canadian hostages that the militant group had been holding. Several further hostages continue to be held by the group, including one Dutch citizen, a Canadian, one Norwegian and 10 Indonesians. The execution followed a statement by the ASG in March 2016, renewing its threat to behead the two Canadians and the Norwegian, who were kidnapped in September 2015, if their ransom was not paid by 15h00 local time on 25 April 2016. The ASG were demanding PHP 300 million (USD 6.4 million) for each of the foreigners. Security forces are continuing with efforts to rescue the hostages as the Filipino government has reportedly maintained its policy of not negotiating with the ASG.



## Crisis Point: How a Weak State is Fuelling Kidnapping and Crime in Venezuela

Police and government corruption, coupled with growing economic and political tensions, are fuelling a security crisis in Venezuela, **writes Lloyd Belton**

Caracas, Venezuela's capital city, has been described as the 'kidnap capital of the world'. In recent years, the city's security situation has gone from bad to worse, and is symptomatic of a deepening economic crisis, rising political tensions, and an increasingly corrupt law enforcement system afflicting the wider country. The situation is reportedly so dire that even anti-kidnap police are carrying out kidnappings. Although statistics on kidnappings in Venezuela are inaccurate, it is clear that incidents are on the rise, driven by a proliferation of small kidnap gangs. With the local currency nearly worthless, kidnap gangs are increasingly demanding US dollar ransoms. As such, foreign nationals are prime targets.

Crime statistics, including kidnappings, are outdated, underreported, and likely manipulated. In the past, the Venezuelan government has admitted to deliberately refraining from releasing crime statistics to improve public perceptions of security. The government has also not released homicide statistics since 2013, when the national homicide rate reportedly stood at 39 murders per 100,000 inhabitants (compared to 27 in Brazil, for example). The Venezuelan Violence Observatory, a local NGO, estimates that the current homicide rate is likely around 90 per 100,000 while the homicide rate in Caracas is reportedly worse, at an estimated 120 homicides per 100,000. Similarly, kidnapping incidents have increased significantly, from an average of 60 kidnappings a year in 1999 to over 1,000 in 2014. Venezuela's estimated kidnap rate per inhabitant is reportedly the highest in the region, and is almost double that of Mexico. The actual number of kidnappings is likely to be much higher however, given that an estimated 80 percent of kidnappings in Venezuela go unreported for fear of reprisals and/or general distrust of authorities.

Several factors, both economic and political, are driving this increase in violent crime and kidnappings in Venezuela. The economy is on the verge of collapse and the Venezuelan government looks set to default on its international loans in the next 12 months. Growing unemployment, hyperinflation – currently estimated at 720 percent, and widespread food and basic necessity shortages have accelerated a spiralling crime problem. In turn, this had led to a proliferation

of express kidnapping gangs in the country seeking quick monetary returns. Moreover, due to the weakening of the bolívar, which has lost 81 percent of its value in the last 12 months, these gangs are increasingly demanding ransoms in foreign currencies. Average ransom demands for wealthy Venezuelan nationals now range from approximately USD 50,000 to USD 70,000, but can often exceed USD 1 million. On average, ransom demands for foreign nationals come close to, or exceed, USD 1 million. In a recent incident, in May 2015, kidnappers demanded USD 700,000 for the release of a Spanish businessman in Aragua State.

Venezuela's government has proved incapable of launching meaningful reforms to address the country's economic and security problems. Although many expected the opposition's landslide victory in the December 2015 parliamentary elections to bring sweeping change to Venezuela, little to no progress has been made. The government is now caught in a political stalemate between an opposition-controlled legislature and a ruling party-controlled executive and judiciary. Efforts by the opposition coalition to overhaul Venezuela's oil-dependent economy and address high-level government corruption have been stifled by the Supreme Court, which is also under the control of the ruling party. Similarly, the opposition has hit a wall in its attempts to address Venezuela's notoriously corrupt justice system and state security agencies. Under the governments of the late Hugo Chávez and current President Nicolás Maduro, the Venezuelan state has further failed to address deficiencies among the security forces. The government has announced a new security plan every year since 1999, for example, only to overhaul them at a later stage. There have been approximately 23 such plans as a result. Meanwhile, corruption has proliferated within the country's various police forces. Venezuela is consistently rated as the most corrupt country in Latin America where 83 percent of Venezuelans believe the police are corrupt or extremely corrupt.

Venezuela's state security forces are poorly-paid, poorly-trained, and under-equipped. Previous studies have found that police are involved in 80 percent of all kidnappings in Caracas. Similar levels of police involvement in kidnappings are also reported in other



## The streets of Caracas, once famed for their nightlife and safety, are at the centre of the country's crime and kidnapping wave.

parts of the country. Corrupt military and intelligence personnel also reportedly collude in kidnappings, supplying kidnap gangs with confidential financial information on their potential targets, such as tax returns. The creation of a central government anti-kidnap and anti-extortion body (CONAS) and state-level tactical units (GAES) in 2013 has done little to address the problem. GAES personnel have also been implicated in several kidnappings, whilst the director of one of the state-level anti-kidnap units in Bolívar State was recently arrested on allegations of extortion.

Caracas is at the epicentre of police corruption in Venezuela. Caracas' metropolitan police were reportedly so corrupt that the government decided to completely disband this 6,000-strong force in 2011. Policing in Caracas under the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB), a branch of the armed forces which took over from the metropolitan police, did initially improve as its better-equipped and better-paid personnel were more effective at combating crime and helped to garner the public's trust. Fast-forward five years however, and the GNB, much like its predecessor, is now synonymous with drug-trafficking, repression, extortion, and kidnapping. The GNB has also become inexorably politicised and is widely recognised by international human rights agencies as being a repressive government arm used to crack down on anti-government groups.

Amidst this worsening security environment, expatriates and foreign business travellers should maintain an increasingly low profile in Venezuela, particularly in Caracas. A number of foreign nationals are reportedly taking extra measures to ensure their security, including: tinting car windows, dressing modestly, avoiding going out at night, and not stopping at traffic lights. As the economy continues to worsen and the bolívar's value plummets, foreign nationals, who are presumed to have access to large amounts of dollars and euros, are likely to be increasingly targeted for kidnap for ransom in Venezuela. Foreign kidnap victims and their relatives can expect little to no help from local Venezuelan authorities, however.

For now, Venezuela's security situation remains severe and there is no light at the end of the tunnel. The various state security agencies need to be overhauled to root out corruption. However, a cash-strapped government caught up in a protracted political dogfight, and undermined by rampant corruption, is highly unlikely to be able to implement the necessary reforms. As such, the threats of violent crime and kidnapping will remain acute for the foreseeable future. The streets of Caracas, once famed for their nightlife and safety, are at the centre of the country's crime and kidnapping wave. Foreign business travellers unfamiliar with the city's high-risk areas and its notoriously corrupt security forces, remain particularly vulnerable to violent crime and kidnapping.



## Has Buhari Meant Business: The Anti-Corruption Drive in Nigeria

While President Buhari's anti-corruption campaign has had some successes, businesses are facing increased scrutiny of their operations, **writes Gabrielle Reid**

President Muhammadu Buhari made combatting Boko Haram and corruption in Nigeria the pillars of his election campaign. This approach proved successful in garnering votes and since Buhari was inaugurated in May 2015, Nigeria and the business community have been waiting in anticipation for the president to tackle these great problems. Yet, close to a year down the line, both the Boko Haram insurgency and corruption remain prominent challenges in the country.

On the corruption front, Buhari has made certain gains. These include suspending the boards of Nigeria's parastatals, launching forensic audits for over 80 state agencies as well as revamping the Economic Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), among others. Furthermore, a number of top officials have come under investigation since Buhari came to power, including former Nigerian Army colonel, Sambo Dasuki over the misappropriation of USD 2.1 billion in funds allocated to help combat Boko Haram, former Minister of Petroleum Resources, Diezani Alison-Madueke over money laundering allegations and Government Tompolo, a former militant-turned-security provider in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. In addition, Buhari is looking to reform the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), having taken over the Petroleum

Resources portfolio following the creation of his cabinet in November 2015. Many investors in the oil and gas sector eagerly anticipate the Petroleum Industry Bill which seeks to separate the commercial and regulatory functions of the NNPC. Yet, with the Bill already ten years old, an imminent ratification appears unlikely.

Thus far, the impact of the anti-corruption campaign remains confined to the oil and gas sector. This has been exacerbated by March 2016 findings that the NNPC failed to pay over USD 16 billion in oil revenues to the government in 2014. With the focus on the NNPC, greater scrutiny is likely to be applied to fuel trader activities and oil-for-product swap agreements. Businesses in these sectors will need to be as vigilant as ever of their partners going forward, as well-connected individuals are likely to be targeted for future investigations.

Buhari's campaign against high-level corruption in state and state-owned institutions is laudable. However, it has created significant uncertainties for businesses. Further, combatting institutionalised corruption at lower levels will require much more long term restructuring, suggesting prolonged commercial challenges for investors.

## Beyond Bombings: Islamic State Kidnappings in Southeast Asia

Islamic State-inspired kidnappings are increasingly likely in Southeast Asia given the proliferation of affiliated militants and local sympathy for the group in the region, **writes Mandira Bagwandeem**

The Islamic State (IS) has its eye on Southeast Asia. While reports had emerged over the past year noting that the group aims to establish a territorial foothold or satellite province in the region, the attack in Jakarta in January 2016 was the first indication that IS had made significant inroads in this regard. This strategy has been further supported by the establishment of the so-called Katibah Nusantara, a Syria-based dedicated Southeast Asian combat unit within IS that is believed to have cells across the region. Local sympathy for the group is also reportedly strong, with between 800 and 1,000 Southeast Asians having left to fight alongside IS in Iraq and Syria, and 22 militant Islamist organisations in the region having pledged allegiance. Security agencies therefore remain on high alert. However, while attention is focused on preventing another explosive IS attack, smaller, more targeted incidents, such as kidnappings also warrant concern.

Established militant Islamist groups that have pledged allegiance to IS are the most likely to be influenced to imitate IS kidnappings, as witnessed with the Philippines-based, Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). While the ASG is renowned for staging kidnappings in its own right, a recent hostage video released

in October 2015 points to this influence. Resembling the theatrics of IS cinematography, three foreign nationals kneel in front of two IS flags, as they are forced to read off the group's demands while a knife is held to their throats. However, despite the use of IS imagery, ASG kidnappings are unlikely to fundamentally change as a result of the group's pledge of allegiance. There has been no indication of a change in targets, ransom demands or length of detainment, for example, nor in the likelihood of an attack.

On the other hand, Southeast Asia is the only region where self-radicalised lone actors and foreign fighters have attempted to stage an IS-inspired kidnapping. In March 2016, Malaysia's Deputy Prime minister revealed that the country's anti-terrorism unit had foiled a plot by a group with ties to IS to kidnap various political leaders, including Prime Minister Najib Razak. The group of six, which included a foreign fighter and radicalised individuals, reportedly aimed to recruit at least 20 others to launch attacks and kidnappings in Malaysia. Seventeen suspects were subsequently arrested and are awaiting trial. Although this appears to have been an isolated incident, it nevertheless points to the level of influence of IS in the region, heightening the kidnapping threat in the short to medium term.

“While attention is focused on preventing another explosive IS attack, smaller, more targeted incidents, such as kidnappings also warrant concern.”

## Target of opportunity: Chinese Investment in Pakistan and the Kidnapping Threat

With a growing number of Chinese investment projects in progress across the country, **Julian Karszen examines** the threat of kidnapping posed to Chinese nationals

**W**ith the number of Chinese infrastructural development projects in Pakistan under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative set to grow over 2016, both Chinese and Pakistani commentators have highlighted the numerous security challenges of operating in the country. Central amongst these is the high risk of kidnapping posed to foreign nationals. While lower numbers of foreign nationals in Pakistan in recent years have meant that the number of reported kidnapping cases involving foreigners has dropped, the anticipated influx of Chinese nationals attached to the initiation of CPEC projects is likely to present new opportunities for kidnapping groups.

Kidnapping dynamics in Pakistan are complex, involving a wide range of actors and motivations. Prominent criminal gangs are known to be closely connected to Islamist militant groups, such as the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), colluding during kidnapping operations. For instance, victims have previously been reported as abducted in a larger urban centre, such as Islamabad, and are subsequently sold to militants and transported to the north-western Federally Administered Tribal Region (FATA), where the TTP has a long-term presence.

While the majority of kidnapping victims in Pakistan are locals, kidnapping actors in Pakistan have significant political and financial

motivations to target Chinese nationals. For example, the TTP has reportedly previously targeted Chinese nationals in response to Chinese military operations against Islamist militants in Xinjiang. Additionally, while a number of Western governments have policies against paying ransoms for the return of their citizens, there is uncertainty over whether this is the case with China, as the Chinese government reportedly has not issued a firm statement on whether it pays ransoms. On 23 August 2015, a Chinese tourist who had been kidnapped by the TTP in 2014 was reportedly recovered safely by security forces, although the details of his release were not disclosed. The TTP typically holds on to hostages for much longer time periods, leading to widespread speculation that either Chinese or Pakistani officials gave in to the group's demands. Although this is the only such recorded incident, the uncertainty surrounding its outcome may lead other kidnapping groups in Pakistan to believe that they can extract ransoms by kidnapping Chinese workers.

The Pakistan security forces have reportedly dedicated significant assets to the protection of personnel and property at CPEC projects. However, kidnapping groups often demonstrate a high degree of capability and organisation, including the use of disparate 'safe houses' to evade detection and hold hostages. As such, security forces may face a challenge to address the threat posed to Chinese nationals in the coming years.

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Source: commons.wikimedia.org

## Egypt under Examination: Wrongful Detention of Foreigners in Egypt

Egypt's repression of political opponents has reportedly included the wrongful detention and torture of many local dissidents. However, the recent death of an Italian researcher has now renewed international attention, **writes Francesca Fazey**

**E**vidence of extensive torture in the death of Italian graduate student Giulio Regeni in Cairo in February 2016 has raised significant concern over the possible involvement of the Egyptian security forces. Regeni went missing from his Cairo neighbourhood on the night of 25 January, amid a widespread security crackdown on the fifth anniversary of the overthrow of former President Hosni Mubarak. His body was discovered nine days later, bearing visible signs of torture. Although the Egyptian government has consistently denied any part in Regeni's death, the timing of his disappearance and the politically sensitive nature of his research make his case particularly suspicious.

Egypt has a long history of political repression, which emerged under Mubarak's regime and continued into the country's recent political transition. Widespread reports of wrongful detention, forced disappearances, torture and death in police custody persisted under the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) between 2012 and 2013. Reports of these practices surged during the 2013 protests which ultimately led to the MB's removal. Since current President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi took office in 2014, these activities have allegedly intensified further, as the government seeks to clamp down on growing opposition. This has contributed to

an environment of state repression in Egypt in which political dissent and government criticism seem to have become targets of state-sanctioned aggression.

While arbitrary arrest and the excessive use of force in police custody are frequently reported by Egyptian activists, these are not typically threats to international visitors. Foreign nationals operating in politically sensitive fields such as journalism or social research have more commonly faced obstructions such as denial of entry, harassment, state interference and deportation. However, Regeni is the first foreign academic to be killed in such circumstances in Egypt. As Regeni's work was highly critical of the Sisi government, having focused specifically on labour unrest and independent trade unions in Egypt under the new regime, reports allege that he was under surveillance by the authorities. In turn, there is now growing speculation of police involvement in his death. With the investigation still underway, and the case somewhat unprecedented in the country, it remains to be seen whether Regeni's death signals the advent of a new threat to other foreign nationals in Egypt. Nevertheless, it has shone a spotlight onto the use of force practised by Egypt's state police against dissidents.

# About



Led by its Business Intelligence division, S-RM leverages its holistic risk management expertise to provide XL Catlin with a range of information resources and advice to inform their business operations. The Global Kidnap Bulletin is a quarterly newsletter produced by S-RM for XL Catlin, profiling recent Kidnap for Ransom and Extortion incidents, related events and global developments worldwide which have the potential to impact personal safety and the safety of a client's family and/or personnel. This newsletter supports the Global Security Insight website which S-RM provides to XL Catlin.

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