

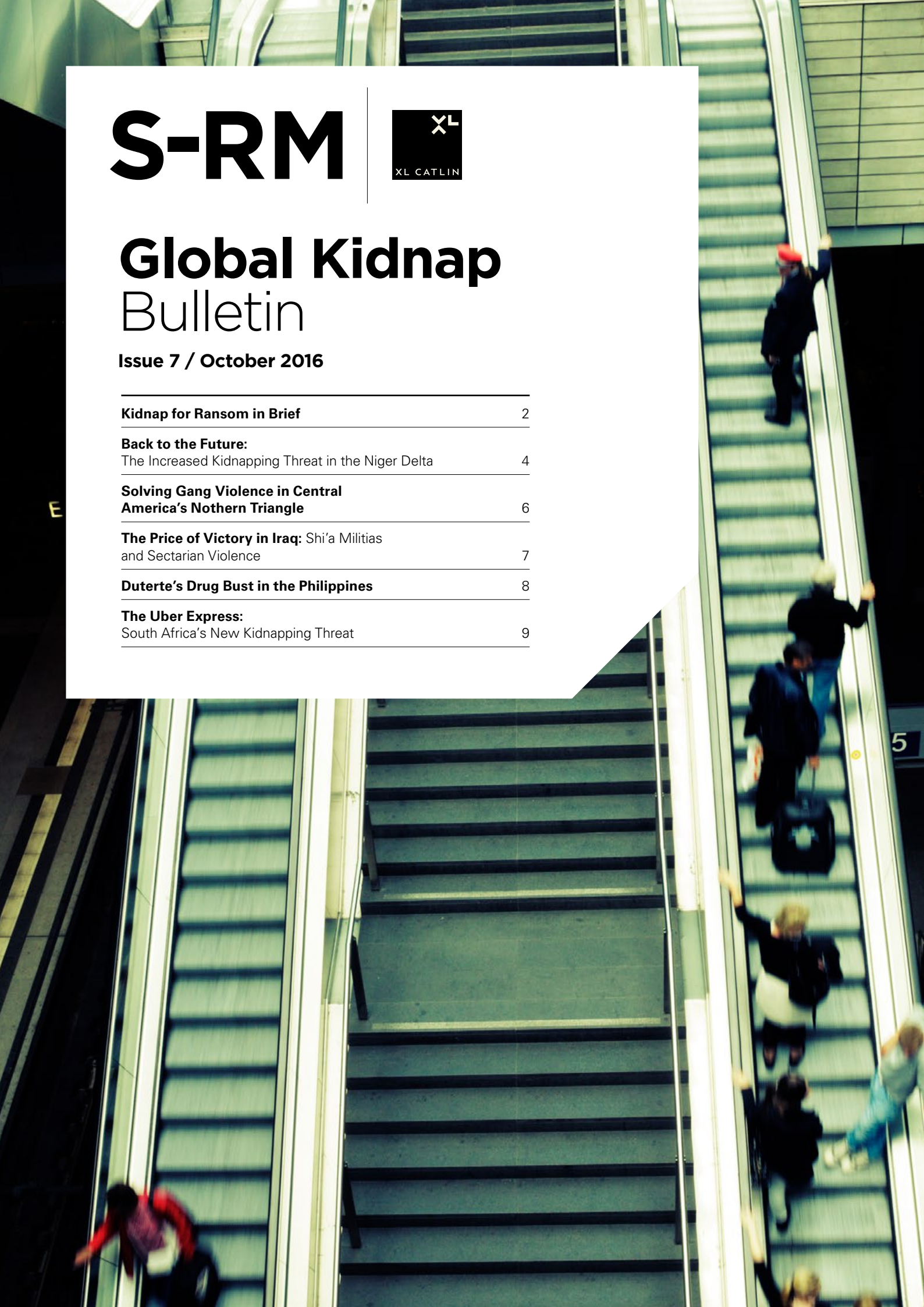
# S-RM



## Global Kidnap Bulletin

Issue 7 / October 2016

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# Kidnap for Ransom in Brief

## 1. United States

On 4 August, nearly 50 people were arrested for belonging to an East Coast crime syndicate. Suspects were charged with what the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) described as “*classic mafia crimes*”, including extortion, loan-sharking, illegal gambling and racketeering, as well as credit card and healthcare fraud. The syndicate reportedly operates in New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Florida and New Jersey. Among those arrested were Joseph ‘Skinny Joey’ Merlino, the alleged head of a Philadelphia mob, as well as Pasquale ‘Patsy’ Parrello, a long-time member of the Genovese organised crime family, a prominent New York-based organised crime gang. During the arrests, FBI agents seized firearms, cash and gambling equipment. Several of the accused already have organised crime-related conviction records.

## 2. Mexico

On 13 September 2016, a 39-year-old Spanish businesswoman, and niece of a high-profile Spanish football official, was express kidnapped after hailing a taxi outside a shopping mall in Santa Fé, Mexico City. The victim was reportedly taken to at least two ATMs and forced to withdraw money before the kidnappers contacted the victim’s relatives to demand a large ransom of approximately MXN 2 million (USD 100,000). Despite the payment of a MXN 69,000 (USD 3,500) ransom, the perpetrators cut off contact with the victim’s relatives at which point the incident was reported to authorities. The victim’s body was found two days later with signs that she had been executed. Initial police reports suggested that the businesswoman had been kidnapped by a small gang of inexperienced kidnappers who likely panicked and killed the victim.

## 3. Argentina

On 31 August 2016, an Argentine businessman was express kidnapped by four criminals in Lomas de Zamora, Buenos Aires, a high-risk area in the city. The victim was reportedly driving to his house after leaving work, when he was kidnapped by several armed individuals who blocked the road with their car. The victim was forced into the back of his own car and driven around for approximately two hours while the perpetrators demanded a USD 50,000 ransom from his relatives. However, the victim’s family immediately alerted authorities who initiated a rescue operation. Following a shootout between police and the perpetrators, the victim was rescued unharmed; however, the assailants escaped. According to the victim’s testimony, the kidnappers had access to a police radio, which may suggest possible collusion with the security forces in carrying out the incident.

## 4. Nigeria

On 2 September, armed gunmen kidnapped 15 workers from a prominent Nigerian oil company. The workers were traveling by bus between the towns of Omoku and Elele in Rivers State. Police confirmed that the kidnappers had demanded a ransom of approximately USD 320,000; however the police dismissed claims that a ransom was paid. The workers were rescued on 18 September, after an investigation led police to the victims’ location. In the southern Niger Delta region, kidnappings are usually carried out by criminals, as well as by militant groups demanding an equitable distribution of oil revenue generated in the region. However, it has not yet been confirmed whether the kidnappers in this case belonged to any of these groups.

## 5. Libya

Two Italians and one Canadian national were kidnapped in Ghat, in the far south-west of Libya, on 19 September. The three were working for an Italian engineering company contracted with upgrading the Ghat airport. Their car was intercepted by three 4x4 vehicles driven by armed, masked men while exiting their work site. The men were not accompanied by a security escort. Libyan and Italian officials have suggested that Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) may have been responsible; however, municipal officials in Ghat claimed that a local criminal gang was behind the incident. Ghat’s position on the Algerian border makes it a transit point for various criminal elements involved in kidnap for ransom activities.

## 6. Montenegro

On 5 September, a bomb blast killed two people in Kotor, a popular tourist resort town located on Montenegro’s Adriatic coast. The incident is reportedly a continuation of gang-related violence that has impacted the town throughout 2016 as a result of a rivalry between the Škaljari and Kavac gangs. Goran Biskupović, an alleged member of the Škaljari gang, was killed when the bomb exploded near his residence in the Muo neighbourhood. Kotor has previously been popular among numerous drug kingpins, including Darko Šarić, who was imprisoned for 20 years for trafficking cocaine in July 2015. In response to elevated organised criminal activity, Montenegrin police have increased their presence in the town since June 2016.

## 7. Yemen

On 20 September, a group of gunmen raided an English language centre in the diplomatic area of western Sana’a and kidnapped its director, a US national. There have been conflicting reports over the incident however, as Yemeni officials claimed that the man had been abducted from his home. Nevertheless, the Shi’a Houthi rebel group, currently in control of Sana’a, claimed responsibility for the abductions. No details of a ransom demand have yet been released, but the incident is likely to be financially motivated. The risk of kidnapping in Yemen is extreme, with multiple militant and rebel groups operating throughout the country.

## 8. Madagascar

On 13 August, a Mauritian businessman working for a prominent multinational telecommunications company was kidnapped whilst travelling between his home and workplace in the south-eastern Ankorondrano area, in the capital, Antananarivo. The kidnappers reportedly demanded a substantial ransom for his release; however, the final ransom amount was not publicly disclosed. The victim was released after six days following negotiations between the kidnappers, his employers and his family. Since 2011, there has been an increase in kidnapping incidents targeting foreign business people and expatriates in Madagascar. While the government has vowed to intensify kidnap prevention mechanisms, formal measures have not yet been implemented.

## 9. Kazakhstan

On 16 July, a high-profile Kazakh composer reported on social media that his 25-year-old son had gone missing in Almaty, Kazakhstan’s largest city. The victim was presumed kidnapped and his family appealed to the potential perpetrators to communicate their ransom demands. This appeal was reportedly posted on several social media platforms, which received significant online attention. The family also offered a KZT 10 million (USD 29,500) reward for any information on his whereabouts. However, the victim’s body was found in the Yessentai River in Almaty on 28 July. Police investigations remain ongoing.

## 10. Kyrgyzstan

On 14 August, a Turkish businessman working for a transport company was reportedly kidnapped by another Turkish national in the capital, Bishkek. While the circumstances surrounding the incident have not been independently verified, reports suggest that the perpetrator kidnapped the victim at his home, and forced him into a car at knife point. The kidnapper allegedly planned to transport the victim to Tajikistan by car before moving on to Afghanistan, while demanding a ransom of between USD 200,000 to USD 500,000. However, Kyrgyz security forces intercepted the kidnapper’s car in eastern Bishkek and rescued the victim who remained unharmed.

## 11. Philippines

On 27 September, six armed men hijacked a fishing vessel and kidnapped the boat’s owner off Semporna, on the eastern coast of Sabha State. Prior to this incident, on 10 September, three Malaysian fishermen were kidnapped from their trawler near Pom Pom Island, also off the eastern coast of Sabha State. Authorities suspect that the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), an Islamist militant group, is behind both incidents. The group has staged several maritime kidnappings since March 2016, primarily targeting Malaysian and Indonesian vessels in the Sulu and Celebes Seas. According to recent reports, elevated security at coastal resorts and seaside towns – typical ASG kidnapping sites – has forced the group to target foreign crews of slow-moving moving vessels.

## Back to the Future: The Increased Kidnapping Threat in the Niger Delta

As the current insurgency in the Niger Delta region mirrors dynamics seen in the early 2000s, kidnappings by militant groups are likely to emerge as a renewed threat in the region, **writes Gabrielle Reid**

The oil-rich yet underdeveloped Niger Delta region of Nigeria provides a unique nexus between the wealthy, the marginalised and the opportunistic. Here, kidnapping for ransom has long proven to be increasingly lucrative. While criminally-motivated abductions are rife in the region, militant groups have also sought to use kidnapping tactics to financially back their operations and to hold the government to ransom in their respective campaigns. Back in the early 2000s, the notorious Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) engaged in numerous high-profile kidnappings which pushed the Nigerian government to the negotiating table. Now, with the emergence of the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), the kidnapping threat in the Niger Delta is again on the global oil industry's radar.

The NDA first emerged in February 2016, taking up arms against the Nigerian government as part of the group's 'Operation Red Economy'. This campaign aims to disrupt Nigeria's oil-dependent economy in order to pressure the federal government into addressing alleged political and socio-economic marginalisation in the region, and to distribute a fairer share of Nigeria's oil revenues to the Delta. The NDA's attacks against pipelines and other key facilities have proven potent in bolstering the group's profile and has increased uncertainty across Nigeria's already troubled oil sector.

However, recent developments suggest that the NDA is adopting new tactics to meet its political objectives. In a 5 July statement, President Muhammadu Buhari's aide, Garba Shehu, claimed that the group was behind the recent spike in the targeted killing of local security forces while simultaneously alleging that the NDA had orchestrated the kidnapping of soldiers and local and foreign oil workers. Notably, the 23 June 2016 kidnapping of seven foreign nationals from an Australian mining operation in Cross River state points to increased insecurity in the region as a result of the NDA's campaign. The group dismissed claims that it was involved in recent kidnappings, pushing the blame onto other criminal groups operating in the region. Nevertheless, the 2 September 2016 seizure of 15 local oil workers from a prominent Nigerian oil company again raised concerns that the militant group is seeking to adopt kidnapping as a tactic. The 15 workers were subsequently freed 16 days later following a police-led operation, although it was not disclosed whether the USD 320,000 ransom demand was paid to secure their release. While it is unclear who was behind the attack, the kidnapping coincided with growing frustrations among the NDA, who having declared a unilateral ceasefire in mid-August 2016, are still awaiting a plan for concrete negotiations with the federal government.

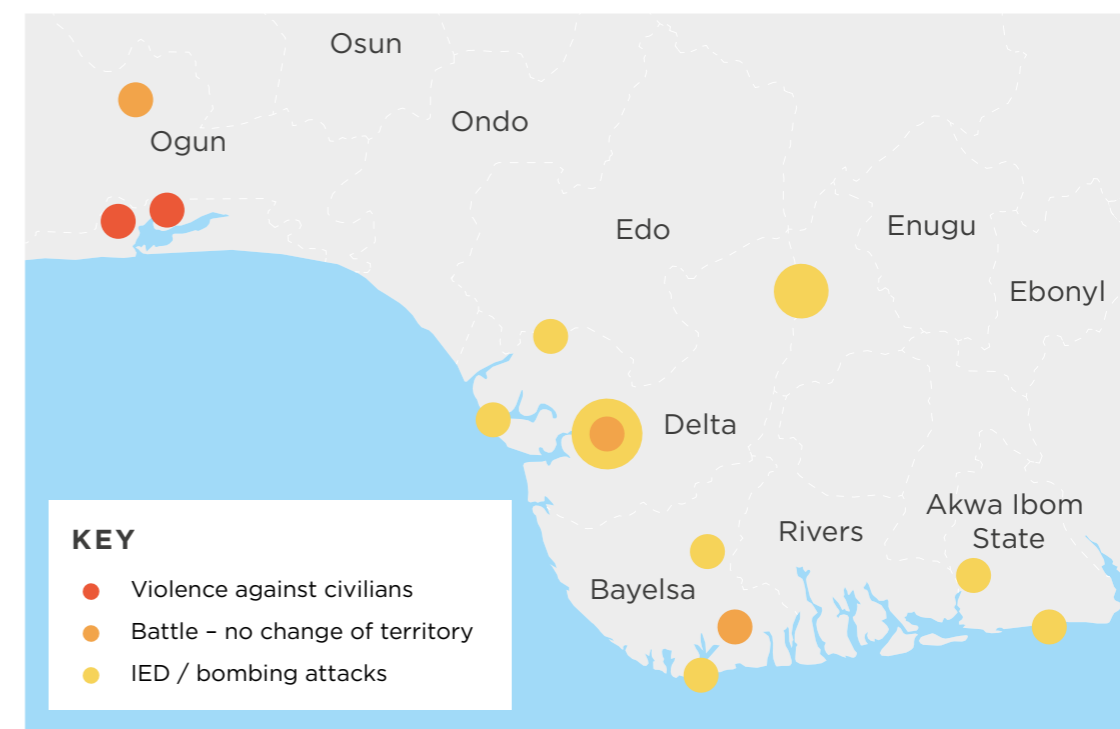
This emerging kidnapping threat is reminiscent of cases seen in the early

2000s, as kidnappings became a key tactic of MEND during the group's Niger Delta insurgency. The group launched itself onto the international stage by claiming the kidnapping of four foreign oil workers from an offshore oil platform in January 2006. Following this, MEND was linked to the abduction of over 150 foreign nationals between 2006 and 2008 alone. The group specifically targeted foreign-owned oil companies, entering into negotiations with Nigerian authorities, the victims' employers and families to secure their release. Although MEND's leadership dismissed claims of ransom demands, emphasising that the kidnappings were part of a political agenda to bring their grievances to the forefront of the federal government's attention, it is widely accepted that the group benefited financially from these exchanges. In a seemingly equally fruitful arrangement, kidnappings of this nature dropped significantly after MEND militants were offered controversial monthly financial stipends to lay down their arms as part of a government amnesty programme launched in 2009. It is therefore unsurprising that the planned December 2015 end to this lucrative amnesty deal sparked renewed tensions in the Niger Delta.

Facing mounting pressure from both former militants and local communities, in January 2016, President Buhari extended these stipend payments until December 2017, but cut the budget allocated to the amnesty programme by 70 percent. With

With the emergence of the Niger Delta Avengers, the kidnapping threat in the Niger Delta is again on the global oil industry's radar."

Niger Delta Avengers Activity, May- August 2016



Source: ACLED

former militants now largely out of pocket, amid a worsening economic outlook for Nigeria, a revitalised armed campaign in the region was largely expected. However, the collective memory of MEND's campaign has resulted in a nervous oil sector in the Delta. This has inadvertently increased the effectiveness of the NDA's campaign, with three major international oil companies temporarily suspending operations, and evacuating key personnel, from the region amid concerns over renewed violence.

The government has sought to adopt a two-pronged approach to securing the strategic region, launching two consecutive military operations against the group alongside calls for peace talks. While 'Operation Crocodile Smile', and its predecessor 'Operation Delta Safe', have had short-term successes against the group, the operations have been largely ridiculed by the group on social media, and government efforts to engage in talks have been repeatedly dismissed.

However, August marked a turning point in the insurgency. On 21 August 2016, the NDA announced a unilateral 60-day ceasefire in a statement on its website in which it also detailed the group's readiness to engage in talks with the federal government. Yet, the ceasefire was not without the group's own demands,

with the NDA calling on the government to cease its alleged harassment of Niger Delta communities, and calling for a troop withdrawal. While the government has expressed its willingness to meet the NDA around the negotiating table, it has yet to abandon its two-tiered approach, with the start of September marked by increased troop deployments in the Niger Delta. This has not been well-received by the NDA, which on 26 September 2016, claimed responsibility for an attack on a foreign-owned oil pipeline near Bonny Island in Rivers State, nullifying the August ceasefire. The group has claimed that constant government delays in commencing the promised talks demonstrated a lack of commitment to reaching a resolution. Although the NDA were quick to leave the negotiations, demonstrating their own lack of goodwill in the talks, the group is unlikely to be easily coaxed to the table for a second time.

With troops already gathered in the Niger Delta, and militant counterparts such as MEND capitalising on renewed government concern over security in the region, the NDA will need to increase pressure to retain government engagement. The group has centred its campaign to date on oil infrastructure, but this is unlikely to be guaranteed in an escalated offensive. Kidnap for ransom is therefore still a viable option for the NDA.

Furthermore, it is increasingly evident that the NDA is not the only militant group operating in the region. The June emergence of the Asawana Deadly Force of Niger Delta and subsequent attacks claimed by the Reformed Egbesu Boys of the Niger Delta, the Adaka Boro Avengers, and the Joint Niger Delta Liberation Force, among others, demonstrates that the NDA no longer enjoys a monopoly on the current Niger Delta insurgency. As these groups vie to boost their own political positions, the insurgency has the potential to become increasingly violent in a pattern similar to the early 2000s crisis.

Although talks with the NDA have already failed, the federal government is financially constrained in what it can offer the group in return for disarmament. Meanwhile, a military solution is equally flawed, requiring a strategically sound offensive by already overstretched Nigerian security forces. The NDA is therefore unlikely to secure what it wants around the negotiating table in the short term, nor is it likely to be militarily defeated. This leaves a previously-tested and lucrative avenue for the group to step up its guerilla campaign to retain its relevance and reputation in the region, one where militant-backed kidnappings offer both financial return, and a fearsome reputation, among the foreign oil industry.

## Solving Gang Violence in Central America's Northern Triangle

While touted as a holistic approach to the region's gang problem, the latest tri-national anti-crime initiative in Central America is unlikely to succeed, **writes Lloyd Belton**

In 2015, more than 16,500 people were killed and 109,000 displaced in Central America's 'Northern Triangle' – comprising Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras – largely as a result of gang violence. Strategies that have involved truces and the so-called 'Mano Dura' ('Iron Fist') approach to curb this threat have been ineffective to date, and many gangs, particularly the infamous Maras, have only grown stronger. Recognising that gang violence is a regional problem, the three Northern Triangle governments recently shifted strategy. In August 2016, the creation of a tri-national anti-crime task force was announced to address this threat. However, the new initiative is ultimately a piecemeal approach and is unlikely to be effective in the long term.

The new tri-national security unit – known as the 'Fuerza Trinacional Antipandillas' (FTA) – forms part of a USD 750 million US-backed security and economic development plan for the region. In addition to the current funding, Northern Triangle authorities are also seeking extra funding from Washington, as well as further intelligence, and anti-narcotics and combat training for local security forces. The FTA's focus is to

dismantle the region's Mara gangs – Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 (MS-18) – which operate transnationally and together boast almost 70,000 members. However, joint operations will only focus on border regions to cut off illicit income streams like money laundering, and drug, weapons and human-trafficking. Cooperation among the three governments will also include intelligence sharing, as well as the creation of a database of gang members and their transnational networks.

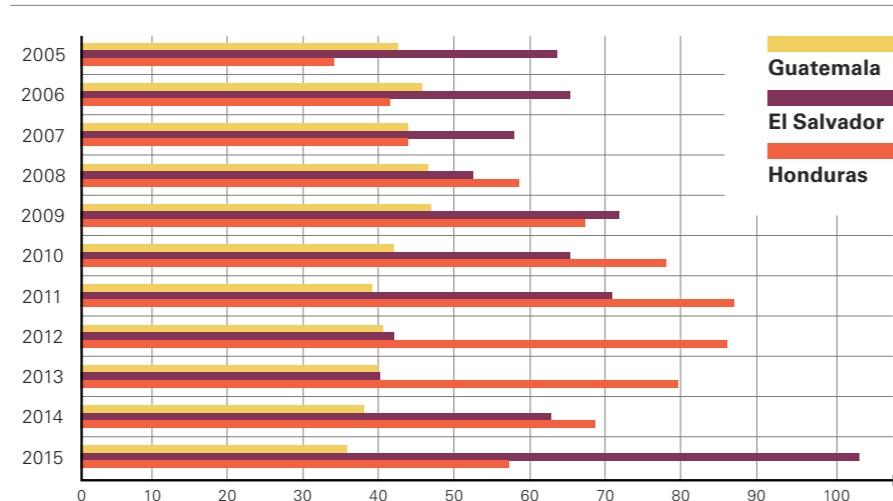
This is not the first attempt to create a multilateral anti-crime task force in the Northern Triangle. Joint-border security initiatives have been touted as the solution to combating transnational organised crime in the region since at least 2002. Northern Triangle governments have experimented with a number of border security agreements, but each has been undermined by a lack of trust, border disputes, and confusion over legal authorisations and jurisdictions. With the FTA, the Northern Triangle governments have called for a standardisation of legislation in the region, including extradition laws, in an effort to prevent these issues from resurfacing. However, homogenising legal frameworks

on a national level will be a protracted process. Moreover, strategically, doubts remain over the FTA's overall effectiveness. With security forces clamping down on illicit cross-border activities, gangs like MS-13 and MS-18 are anticipated to increasingly rely on other revenue streams like extortion and kidnapping, particularly in urban areas. There is already evidence in Honduras that the Mara gangs are expanding their extortion activities and increasingly targeting larger companies. Moreover, in El Salvador, gang extortion is estimated to cost three percent of the country's GDP per year.

Critics of the FTA have also pointed out that without development and economic opportunities, impoverished youths will continue to join these gangs. US development aid is expected to partially fill this gap, but government corruption – recently highlighted in a series of high-level scandals in Guatemala and Honduras – raises serious doubts about whether this will be put to effective use. Without more jobs, better education, and greater government accountability, the Northern Triangle's gang problem is here to stay.

**With security forces clamping down on illicit cross-border activities, gangs like MS-13 and MS-18 are anticipated to increasingly rely on other revenue streams like extortion and kidnapping.**

Northern Triangle Homicide Rates (per 100,000 people)



## The Price of Victory in Iraq: Shi'a Militias and Sectarian Violence

As the Iraqi army moves towards its final stage of operations against the Islamic State militant group, the controversial involvement of Shi'a militias threatens to undo the military's gains, **writes Julian Karszen**

The conflict in Iraq has steadily turned against the Islamic State (IS) militant group, highlighted by the loss of the group's stronghold of Fallujah to an Iraqi army offensive in late June. However, to realise these defeats, the Iraqi government has relied on the involvement of Shi'a Muslim militias, over which the government has exercised limited control. These groups have been accused of various human rights abuses against Sunni civilians. As the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) steadily move to retake the IS-held city of Mosul, the involvement of these militias threatens to exacerbate already-pronounced sectarian tensions in 'liberated' areas.

Shi'a militias – notably the Iran-backed Kata'ib Hezbollah – were integral in the offensive against Fallujah. However, this involvement has come with reportedly severe consequences. Following the clearing of IS from the city, Kata'ib Hezbollah allegedly seized some 900 civilian men from the village of Saqlawiyah, near Fallujah, and subjected up to 50 of them to extra-judicial killings. Similar incidents, including torture and forced disappearances, were reported during Shi'a militia operations in Tikrit in April 2015, as well as following operations in the eastern Diyala Governorate. Many of these incidents have been interpreted as revenge attacks by Shi'a militias against Sunni communities, who Shi'a militia members believe are complicit in IS's occupation.

In some areas, Shi'a militias have come to closely resemble IS, engaging in kidnapping for ransom and extortion rackets. For instance, on the primary road route between the Iranian border and Iraqi Kurdistan, long-haul truck drivers have reportedly been extorted by the Hashd Al

Shaabi militia, which claims to have 100,000 fighters operating alongside the ISF. Other drivers report that Shi'a militia fighters have kidnapped their relatives, in one case demanding an IQD 10 million (USD 7,800) ransom. While Hashd Al Shaabi commanders have denied the accusations and blamed local criminals masquerading as militia members, the damaging impression that Shi'a militias are merely a replacement for IS is one that proliferates throughout Sunni communities.

Kidnappings by Shi'a militias have also targeted foreign nationals. Most prominently, in January 2016, three US security contractors were abducted by a Shi'a militia from an apartment in the capital, Baghdad. While the three were released unharmed a month later, following intensive negotiations with the Iraqi government, the incident highlighted the lack of control that the government holds over these militias.

These dynamics threaten to prolong Iraq's instability even as IS's strength begins to wane, as the same sectarian tensions which promoted the group's formation continue to be exploited. Despite this, the Iraqi government is unlikely to make a concerted effort to rein in the Shi'a militias. In March, the Nineveh Provincial Council reportedly called for an exclusion of Hashd Al Shaabi from the impending Mosul operation out of fears that the militia's involvement would spark greater sectarian violence. However, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al Abadi has refused the request, retorting that "nobody can stop Iraqis from participating in the liberation of their land". However, in Mosul and Iraq's Sunni areas, the cost of 'liberation' may be higher than Al Abadi expects to pay.

“The damaging impression that Shi'a militias are merely a replacement for IS is one that proliferates throughout Sunni communities.



Image: commons.wikimedia.org

## Duterte's Drug Bust in the Philippines

Since entering office on 30 June, the new Filipino President, Rodrigo Duterte, has launched a ruthless anti-drugs campaign that has resulted in thousands of deaths. With no end in sight in the short term, the tally of drug-related deaths by security forces and vigilante groups is likely to increase, **writes Mandira Bagwandeem**

In fulfilling his election promise to tackle the Philippines' illegal drug trade, the recently elected President, Rodrigo Duterte, nicknamed the 'Punisher', has been relentless in his mission to destroy the country's narcotics industry. Since formally taking office on 30 June, more than 3,000 people have been killed by police and vigilante groups without any due process. As a result, thousands of drug dealers and users have turned themselves in at police stations and entered rehabilitation centres to avoid becoming another statistic in Duterte's drug war.

With over 600,000 dealers and users having already surrendered to authorities, the Duterte administration considers its crackdown a success. However, the government is ill-equipped to assist addicts with rehabilitation; with only 45 rehabilitation facilities nationally, and most already filled to capacity, many recovering drug users

have no recourse to professional support. This lack of resources has the government scrambling to develop rehabilitation services.

Despite the lack of infrastructure and staff required to assist with the sudden increase in the number of addicts seeking help, Duterte has continued to wage his war on drugs, even encouraging citizens to kill those suspected of being involved in the trade. Furthermore, he has encouraged security forces to use maximum force saying, "Do your duty and if in the process you kill one thousand persons because you were doing your duty, I will protect you."

The large number of drug-related extra-judicial killings have given rise to domestic and international condemnation of Duterte's campaign. Locally, Senator Leila de Lima, the chairwoman of a committee investigating police and vigilante killings

related to the illicit drug trade, has been leading protests against Duterte's bloody crackdown. However, in September 2016, under allegations that she was using the committee for exacting "personal political vendettas", de Lima was removed from her position by the Senate. Her removal is considered a political manoeuvre to clear any opposition to the anti-drugs crusade. Internationally, human rights groups, the EU, and UN, have also condemned the drug war; however, Duterte continues to blatantly dismiss these concerns.

Overwhelmed by the scale of the Philippines' drug problem, Duterte, who was elected in May 2016 largely on the back of promising to demolish the illicit drug trade in six months, announced in September that his government requires another six months to fulfil this mandate. As such, with no end in sight in the short term, the drug-related death toll will continue to increase.

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## The Uber Express: South Africa's New Kidnapping Threat

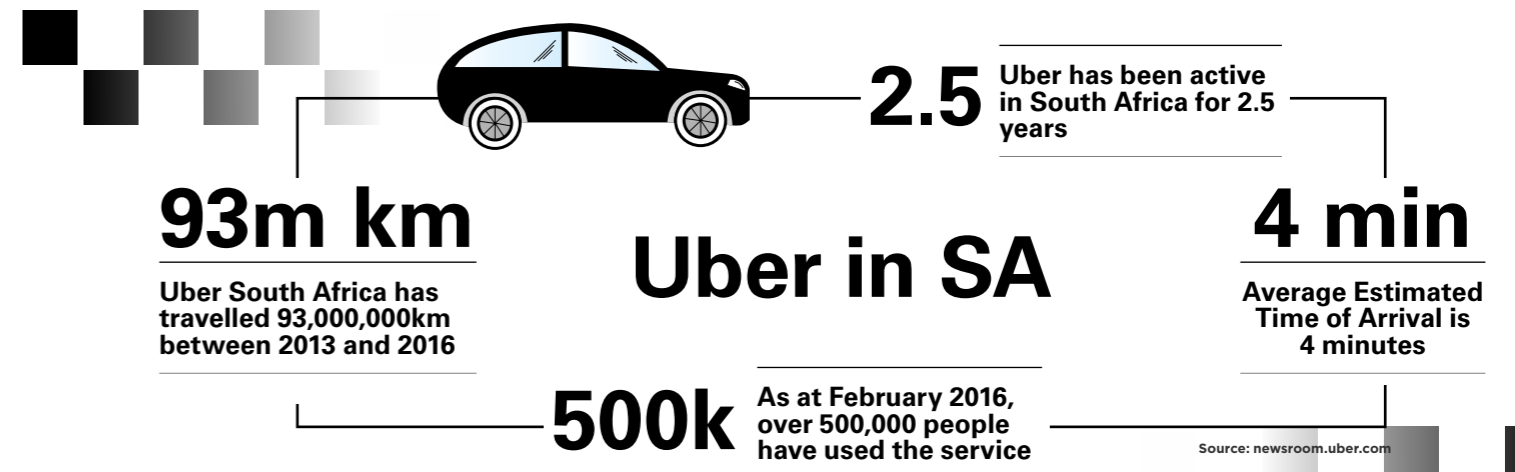
A recent series of express kidnappings in Johannesburg, conducted under the guise of the convenient Uber taxi service, points to a new kidnapping threat in the country, **writes Grant Caswell**

Over July and August 2016, three separate reports of individuals being assaulted and robbed during express kidnappings involving Uber taxi services were reported in Johannesburg, South Africa's commercial hub. The near identical attacks point to a developing criminal trend in the country, the hallmark of the incidents being the use of Uber taxi services. The service allows users to request a taxi via a GPS-linked application on their smartphone that alerts the nearest driver to their location. Here, perpetrators deceptively pose as official Uber drivers at busy locations in a highly effective strategy for identifying a prospective target.

In the first incident in July, a woman requested an Uber taxi outside of a popular casino in Johannesburg's Fourways area. After getting into the front passenger seat, she was ambushed by two men hiding in the back of the vehicle. Similar attacks took place in August when a second woman was ambushed in Fourways and a couple accosted after they left a popular night club in Sunninghill, 11km from the first two incidents. In two of these cases, the victims were bound, assaulted and then detained for several hours before being taken to an ATM and forced to withdraw

money. They were later abandoned in the informal settlement of Tembisa, just under 30km from Fourways, after being robbed of their money and valuables. In the second incident, the victim thwarted the kidnappers' plans by jumping from the moving vehicle. While robbery appears to be the primary motivation behind the express kidnappings, during the two successful attacks, the female victims were also raped before being abandoned. This speaks to the vulnerability of the victims, easily overpowered by two attackers.

Investigations have led to the arrest of three men who police believe were involved in at least two of the incidents. However, while charges against two of the suspects have been provisionally withdrawn due to insufficient evidence, it is likely that the men were part of a small syndicate. Uber responded to these incidents by imploring users of the service to make use of the App's built-in mechanisms to verify the identity of taxi drivers before entering vehicles. However, given the prevailing high crime rates in the country and the established precedent of express kidnappings conducted by criminals posing as meter taxi drivers, the threat of further kidnappings of this nature is nevertheless likely to continue.



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