Kidnapping of Foreigners in Nigeria’s ‘Middle Belt’

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Summary

Although most of Nigeria’s kidnappings-for-ransom occur in the Niger Delta region, this year there has been an increase in abductions of foreigners in central states, often referred to as Nigeria’s “Middle Belt.” In several incidents, foreign construction workers -- often Chinese nationals -- have been kidnapped. In other cases, OSAC is aware of three recent incidents where Western missionaries have been kidnapped. The increase in kidnappings in the Middle Belt may be the result of southern-based criminal groups extending their areas of operation northwards. The number of incidents has prompted some organizations to review their risk ratings for central states, and in some cases increasing the level from medium to high risk.

Recent Incidents

OSAC is aware of three recent incidents where Western missionaries working for international faith-based organizations were kidnapped this year.

- In July, unidentified gunmen kidnapped a male U.S. citizen missionary in Bokkos, Plateau state. The kidnappers allegedly demanded a ransom of USD 250,000 (N50 million) for the missionary’s release. The victim was released a week later.
- In May, unidentified gunmen kidnapped an Irish priest in Waje Ribah, Kebbi state. The kidnappers allegedly demanded a ransom of USD 250,000 (N50 million) for the missionary’s release. The victim was released a week later.
- In February, unidentified gunmen kidnapped a female U.S. citizen missionary from the Hope Academy compound in Emiworo, Kogi state. The kidnappers allegedly demanded a ransom of USD 300,000 (N60 million) for the missionary’s release. The victim was released two weeks later.

In addition to Western missionaries, there have also been a number of foreigners -- mostly construction workers -- kidnapped in the Middle Belt this year.

- On July 28, a Lebanese engineer was kidnapped near Minna, the capital of Niger state, while en route to a construction site. The victim’s vehicle was attacked by unidentified gunmen who some
reports say had set up roadblocks on Minna-Tegina road; other sources state the assailants were in a vehicle that intercepted the victim. The victim was reportedly released on August 3.

- On June 24, an Argentinian national was abducted while traveling without an escort on a road near Machagui, Niger state. The victim was reportedly released on June 29. According to police, other kidnappings had previously occurred on the same road, which links Mokwa and Kontagora.
- On May 18, unidentified gunmen kidnapped a Sri Lankan national working for a construction company in the Ijuma local government area of Kogi state. The incident occurred as the victim was on his way from Okene, Kogi, to Ondo state. The assailants shot and killed a MOPOL officer who was reportedly accompanying the worker in the same vehicle, and injured the worker's driver. (Although not in the Middle Belt, a similar situation happened on May 1 in Auchi, Edo state, where gunmen kidnapped an expatriate construction company worker, shooting and injuring the accompanying MOPOL officer.)

Moreover, earlier in the year multiple Chinese construction workers were kidnapped.

- On April 11, a Chinese national was kidnapped at a quarry in Upper Gugu, Niger state.
- On March 12, three Chinese workers were abducted near Kogi's state capital, Lokoja.
- On February 24, a Chinese worker was kidnapped at a water plant in Toto, Nasarawa state.

Analysis

Business travelers in Nigeria are generally vulnerable to abductions while in transit, yet individuals working on construction sites make particularly attractive targets as they are often located in areas outside main cities with less robust police presence. Missionaries had previously not been targeted in Nigeria, although several Western missionaries were kidnapped in the Far North of Cameroon by Boko Haram in April 2014. The cases targeting Christian missionaries seem to involve Fulani perpetrators, who are generally nomadic or semi-nomadic northern Muslim herders. The Fulani may be carrying out the kidnapping operations with the support and expertise of southern-based criminals. With their expertise in the logistics of kidnapping operations but lack of familiarity with the Middle Belt region (where expatriates often travel unprotected), southern criminal elements may be collaborating with or using Fulani accomplices to tap a new kidnapping market. Many private-sector organizations in the Lagos and Niger Delta region, particularly energy-related businesses, implement robust security measures that likely mitigate a number of kidnapping attempts.

There is no definitive evidence of a Fulani-southern link, primarily because so few perpetrators are ever arrested. It could also be that unrelated criminal groups are increasingly engaging in kidnapping, realizing the quick economic gains generated at a relatively low risk. However, there appears to be some similarity in tradecraft. For example, similar to the majority of kidnappings in the south, those in the Middle Belt have involved an exorbitant initial ransom demand (in the hundreds of thousands of U.S. dollars) followed by quick negotiations for a much lower actual payment (in the low thousands of dollars). In addition, the victims are usually released after a period of days or, at most, weeks. This contrasts with kidnappings by northern Islamist extremists, where negotiations can drag on for months and end in either the payment of millions of dollars or the hostages' deaths.
**Geographical Variation**

While the increase in kidnappings in the Middle Belt is a more recent phenomenon, kidnapping incidents continue in traditionally high-risk areas, particularly the northeast and southeast. But, from a risk management/business operations perspective, it is important to keep in mind that these incidents are motivated by a variety of agendas and not all are equally likely to affect business travel or operations. In short, there is a significant geographical variation in kidnapping risk levels that is due to different actors with different priorities employing different tactics.

**Northeast Nigeria**

A large number of kidnappings take place in Boko Haram’s stronghold in northeast Nigeria, particularly in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states. In April 2014, Boko Haram claimed responsibility for kidnapping almost 280 girls from the Chibok girls’ school in Borno state and is responsible for numerous other mass abductions. While the group likely remains motivated to target foreign nationals for kidnapping, the number of foreigners actually kidnapped in the northeast has declined over the past two years. This development is likely not due to a reduction in risk, but rather a decrease in foreigners operating in the area and the implementation of robust security measures by individuals and organizations. Boko Haram would certainly seize foreign nationals should the opportunity present itself.

**Niger Delta Region**

Despite Boko Haram’s heavy presence in the northeast and the increase of kidnappings in the Middle Belt, the majority of kidnappings take place in the southern, oil-rich Niger Delta states of Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, and Cross River. Kidnapping for ransom became a prominent security issue in the Delta region in 2005 and 2006 when a number of militant groups aligned with the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) used kidnapping to protest their grievances against foreign and domestic extractive industries.

While traditional kidnappings generally take place on land, Nigeria has also witnessed a blend of sea-based piracy and hostage taking in the Gulf of Guinea and across Nigeria's littoral waters. Offshore piracy has become a major criminal enterprise with attacks evolving from oil siphoning and bunkering to well-coordinated and often violent ones that target commercial shipping vessels and their crew. Gulf of Guinea pirates have sought to kidnap crew members, particularly Western nationals, and transfer them to safe houses onshore. In an incident in February 2015, pirates boarded Malta-flagged oil tanker *Kalamos* while it was docked off the southeastern coast of Nigeria, killed the deputy captain, and kidnapped two Greek and one Pakistani crew members. The three hostages were released in late February reportedly after a ransom was paid.

**Outlook**

Organizations frequently rank Nigeria among the five countries most affected by kidnapping; the State Department continues to highlight the credible risk of kidnapping in its [Travel Warning for the country](https://travel.state.gov/travel heed/ant). Official annual kidnapping statistics have not been made publicly available since 2012, when Nigeria officially reported 600 kidnappings incidents. Yet, Nigeria, like many other countries, suffers from a high underreporting of kidnapping incidents and most non-governmental organizations assess the true rate to be considerably higher. It is difficult to assess whether the increase of kidnappings in the Middle Belt is...
offset by lower rates of kidnappings elsewhere. Interestingly, over the past year there does appear to have been a reduction in the number of kidnappings of foreigners in urban centers, such as Abuja and Lagos, but it is impossible to tell whether the two trends are related.

Given their effectiveness as crimes and the relatively low risk to the perpetrators, Nigeria’s kidnapping dynamics are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. The threat to foreigners will remain elevated, particularly in high-risk areas in the Niger Delta, northeast Boko Haram strongholds, and increasingly in the Middle Belt region. Since many kidnapping cases in the Middle Belt and Niger Delta end when a ransom is paid and victims are released unharmed after being held for relatively short periods, the trend is likely to continue as long as kidnapping remains profitable and there is a relatively low risk of identification, capture, and prosecution. Consequently, the threat to foreigners (and certain locals) employed by foreign-owned or -affiliated organizations remains elevated, especially to individuals conducting longer-term travel in high-risk areas.

Guidance

While OSAC constituents cannot completely mitigate the threat of kidnapping, vigilant personal security practices -- avoiding late night and early morning travel, varying times and routes, utilizing armored vehicles, maintaining a low profile, avoiding displays of wealth, arranging transportation ahead of time, avoiding unmarked taxis or public transport, traveling in groups, and traveling with security escorts -- can reduce the likelihood of being kidnapped. Constituents should also consider procuring a kidnap and ransom insurance policy. While policies vary, most will obligate an insurer to pay the costs necessary to secure the safe return of an insured person kidnapped in a covered territory.

- Road travel should be undertaken only in daylight hours with good journey management and, when appropriate, secure escorts. Where possible, undertake medium- and long-distance travel by air.
- Organizations should strongly consider utilizing mobile police (MOPOL) escorts when undertaking overland travel. It is also wise to travel in a different vehicle than MOPOL officers to reduce the risks if violence occurs between the police and criminals.
- Remain alert for signs of being watched or observed; this includes static surveillance of premises and other vulnerable points such as returning to a vehicle.
- Ensure robust communications plan are in place; consider carrying a satellite phone when travelling to remote areas to ensure that you have access to alternative means of communication.

For Further Information

Please direct any questions regarding this report or the general security situation in Nigeria to OSAC’s Regional Analyst for West and Central Africa.