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GLOBAL SUMMARY

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ARTICLE
**COVID-19 AND
EXTREMISM**

November

2020 REPORT
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INSIGHT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SUMMARY

This issue of Constellis' Kidnap for Ransom Insight Report covers global kidnapping incidents and trends for the months of September, October and November 2020. The information is derived from multi-source analysis of kidnap for ransom activity and where known, the outcome or resolution of the events. The report covers current kidnap for ransom hotspots at regional, national and provincial levels, with a particular focus on areas where kidnap for ransom activity is increasing.

Statistical analysis of data for September and October 2020 is included on page 13, which displays kidnap for ransom trends by region, victims by nationality and employment sector, as well as identifying the Top 10 countries for the kidnapping of foreign nationals over the reporting period. Additionally, 12-month statistical information (November 2019 – October 2020) can be found on page 17.

The Global Piracy Update gives an overview of the piracy threat by region, providing trend analysis for September and October 2020. It also offers sample cases that took place during these months to illustrate identified trends.

The Cybersecurity section examines current issues affecting companies and individuals in the realm of IT security. This edition explores cyber threats to the maritime industry. Since Constellis' last overview of cyber threats to the maritime sector in December

2017, cyberattacks against the industry have risen by approximately 900%. This spiralling trend has exposed ongoing vulnerabilities in the sector, which, when combined with its economic importance, have contributed to shipping companies being highly-prized targets for cybercriminals. Cyberattacks against both vessels and onshore facilities can have severe consequences, both in financial terms and potential loss of life. With cyber security experts having long warned of these risks, the maritime sector needs to rapidly improve its defences in several key areas.

The Focus Article examines the effects that COVID-19 has had on extremism. The coronavirus pandemic has opened new doors for terrorist organisations and other extremist groups, presenting a series of challenges in the fight against these phenomena. Despite worldwide movement restrictions, extremist organisations have used the chaos accompanying the virus to their advantage. While the full effects that the outbreak has had on terrorist activity are yet to be ascertained, new reports show that online radicalisation efforts have increased notably, while counter-terrorism operations have suffered from redeployments and budgetary constraints as a result of the outbreak, allowing terrorists to exploit the security vacuum. Hate groups have also been seen to gain a greater foothold, mainly through online activity.

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AMERICAS

Over September-October 2020, the Americas experienced an increase of 85% in the number of foreign nationals kidnapped in the region. This denoted a significant jump on the levels observed over the past eight months, which mirrors a general increase in kidnapping activity across the region, potentially linked to economic disruption brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. As mentioned previously, this has pushed both organised criminal groups and individuals looking for a quick profit to rely more heavily on activities such as kidnap and extortion. Another by-product of the pandemic has been the security vacuum created by the refocus of government efforts on infection control, which was quickly taken advantage of by organised criminal groups. In Mexico, the pandemic served to exacerbate the security crisis. At present it is estimated that over 200 organised criminal groups have an operational presence in at least 75% of the country and exert effective control in over 20% of it. Similarly, since the pandemic struck the continent, Haiti has observed an exponential increase in violence, including kidnapping. According to local media, at least one kidnapping is recorded every day, many of them in plain daylight. This is the work of heavily armed gangs which have an established and active presence in several areas of the country, especially in the capital and its surroundings. Port-au-Prince has thus emerged as the top hotspot of kidnapping for ransom in the country, with the communes of Delmas and Carrefour as its epicentre. The recent deterioration of security conditions in Haiti triggered the French government to issue a security warning on 28 October, advising its nationals to avoid travel to the country and formally discouraging all visits to Port-au-Prince.

CASES:

▸ A Los Angeles firefighter who was kidnapped in Mexico was found dead in early November. Francisco Aguilar's disappearance was reported on 20 August by relatives who found his apartment in the city of Rosarito, Baja California state, ransacked and his vehicles missing. Mexican authorities announced in October the arrest of a man and a woman, who were found in possession of Aguilar's bank cards, which were used after his disappearance. Investigations revealed that the woman had lured Aguilar by asking him on a date, with the man being in charge of the actual kidnapping. The sequence of ensuing events remains unclear, but it is believed that the kidnapping may not have gone according to plan, perhaps with the victim fighting back, leading to his murder.

▸ Peruvian national Mary Lucero Mesco, who lives in Mexico, has been missing since she travelled on 13 August to Jalisco to carry out procedures relating to her daughter's custody. Soon after, the woman's boyfriend was contacted by alleged cartel members demanding MXP 120,000 (approximately USD

Los Angeles firefighter Francisco Aguilar, whose body was found in Mexico in early November. (Photo: Daily Mail)

6,000) in ransom. Some local media reported that the family paid MXP 250,000 (nearly USD 12,000); however, Mesco was not released.

▸ Politician and CEO of Titi Lotto Borlette Wolf Hall was released on 25 October, allegedly following the payment of approximately USD 324,000. Hall was kidnapped on 20 October in the Carrefour area of Port-au-Prince by people wearing uniforms of the Haitian National Police (PNH) who intercepted his vehicle. The abduction was publically claimed by a man known as Ti-Lapli, the leader of the 'Grand Ravine' gang, which is member of the criminal syndicate known as 'G9 - An Fanmi E alye'.

In Trinidad and Tobago (T&T), violent crime has continued to spiral due to increasing gang activity, particularly drug trafficking. While T&T has traditionally been an important transit point for smuggling operations on the South America-US route, security conditions in the island nation degraded further in parallel with the deepening of the Venezuelan crisis. In this context, many Venezuelan criminal groups – including kidnapping gangs – emigrated to T&T, where they established a new hub of operations. This gained the country a spot among the US Department of Defense's Top 35 countries for kidnapping. While abductions and other violent crimes in the country mainly affect local nationals, foreigners can become victims as well. The threat is greater in the capital, Port of Spain, particularly in the areas of Laventille, Beetham, Sea Lots, Cocorite, and Queen's Park Savannah, where crime rates are higher. Meanwhile in Colombia, violence continues unabated. This not only due to the ongoing turf wars between the different armed groups, but most recently, also as dissident FARC units along with paramilitary groups target demobilised militants who refuse to be recruited into their ranks or who are viewed as traitors for having joined the peace process. According to recent reports, over 200 demobilised militants have been killed since the signing of the peace deal in September 2016. As the government fails to protect demobilised militants and their families, they grow more disillusioned with the peace deal. This presents a major threat to Colombian security, with the possibility of these ex-militants reigniting the movement or joining the ranks of criminally-motivated dissident groups.

CASES:

▸ The mother of businessman Anil Ali, who owns the Cost Cutters chain of supermarkets, was kidnapped from the car park of one of the family supermarkets in the Trinidadian city of Sangre Grande on 23 September. Mary Ali was walking towards the supermarket in the company of her two bodyguards when two armed men in a 4x4 pulled up and bundled her into the vehicle, which sped off in the direction of the locality of Coalmine. The elderly woman was released in the locality of Manzanilla on the morning of 26 September. According to the police, no ransom was paid, with the release being the result of a series of security operations that put pressure on the criminals. No arrests have been made yet.

▸ A high-profile rancher was released on 2 October, in a rural locality of Saravena, Arauca department, near the border with Venezuela, almost a week after he was kidnapped by FARC dissidents of the 'Frente décimo Martín Villa'. According to the authorities, Javier Francisco Barbosa, former president of the Cattle Ranchers Committee of Arauca and brother of the mayor of the city of Villavicencio, was released as a result of military operations in the area that put pressure on the kidnappers. Barbosa was abducted on 27 September from one of his properties in Arauca. A ransom of COP 1 billion (approximately USD 274,000) had been reportedly demanded by his captors for his release.

Co$$Cutters supermarket in Sangre Grande, T&T, from where businesswoman Mary Ali was kidnapped (Photo: Stabroek News)

EUROPE

Over the reporting period, Europe experienced a return to previously-observed kidnap levels, accounting for just over 4% of the pool of logged foreign victims. The reversal was linked to a decrease in reporting around the socio-political crisis in Belarus. However, over 100 days since the contested election, the crisis is far from over. President Lukashenko is still in power and the violent crackdown on the opposition movement is ongoing. The situation has reached a stalemate in the virtual absence of any leadership on the side of the opposition, following the expulsion or incarceration of all Lukashenko's political rivals. In response, the European Union on 19 November agreed to work on a third round of sanctions against the Belarusian government, as well as individuals and organisations deemed to be supporting the Lukashenko regime. In addition, persecution of ethnic and religious minorities is not uncommon in former soviet republics. This is a well-documented issue for instance, in Ukraine, where hate crimes targeting religious and ethnic minorities are a widespread concern. Such crimes can range from verbal harassment to physical assault. Moreover, the authorities not only often fail to respond to such incidents, but have in the past been accused of participating in this harassment in a sort of unofficial state policy. A number of victims have been expatriates, refugees or dual nationals.

CASES:

- Police in Belarus arrested a Swiss citizen, accused in participating in the ongoing protests against President Alexander Lukashenko. The Swiss foreign ministry on 26 September confirmed the detention of a female dual Swiss-Belarussian national. However, no further details were given. According to media sources, the woman was arrested along with a number of other people in the Belarussian capital, Minsk, on 19 September, during a demonstration against Lukashenko.

- In early October, Ukrainian NGO 'Azan Association of Muslim Refugees' denounced that Ukrainian law enforcement agencies, in cooperation with the special services of Uzbekistan, are illegally detaining and forcibly repatriating Muslim Uzbeks in Ukraine. One such case was the abduction of Alisher Khaidarov, who was reported missing by his wife after he failed to return home from a trip to the Ukrainian city of Bila Tserkva on 5 October. Khaidarov was kidnapped while traveling back home in a taxi. According to the taxi driver, they were intercepted by a minibus. Subsequently, people in civilian clothes, identifying themselves as members of the Ukrainian Security Services (SBU), forcibly took Khaidarov away in the minibus. The next day, Khaidarov's mother received a phone call from unknown people notifying her that

her son was in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent. She later received a call from Khaidarov, asking her to tell his wife not to look for him. Since then, Khaidarov's whereabouts are unknown.

Activists demand the release of Swiss-Belarussian Natallia Hersche, who was arrested in Minsk on 19 September, during a demonstration against Lukashenko. (Photo: Viasna)

In France, the terrorism threat has been elevated to its highest level following a series of attacks perpetrated in the country and against French interests elsewhere since mid-October. These incidents were in response to statements made by President Emmanuel Macron in the wake of the assassination of a school teacher after he showed his students cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. The statements were deemed anti-Islamic by some Muslim communities, as they condoned the depiction of the Prophet in the name of freedom of expression. International terror groups soon responded, issuing calls to arms against France, its nationals and interests, as well as its supporters. Rather than a centrally-coordinated response, these statements served to encourage lone-wolf activity. Kidnapping has so far not been a tactic utilised by these individuals, as they favour instead more unsophisticated methods producing immediate results, such as attacks with crude weaponry or vehicle ramming. However this cannot be fully disregarded. Meanwhile, in Spain, crimes linked to drug trafficking continue to increase, in line with the upward trend observed since 2016. Moreover, an increase in violence between organised criminal groups has also been observed, linked to the disruption of the trafficking business. This was brought about by global travel restrictions and other measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused instability and volatility in the narcotics markets, with a limited number of shipments and skyrocketing prices. In this context, a number of abductions have taken place, linked to settling of scores between criminals groups or debt collection.

CASES:

- Members of the Spanish National Police arrested three people in a locality of Almería as they were moving a kidnap victim between vehicles. According to investigations, the man was abducted as a result of a financial dispute over a sale of drugs. The suspects reportedly called the victim to a meeting on 23 September, during which the attackers forced the man into their vehicle and took him to the locality of Olula del Río. The next morning, the suspects called a relative of the hostage and demanded a ransom of EUR 29,000. The relative only managed to gather part of the money, having to apply for a loan to meet the demand. Meanwhile, the authorities continued investigations into the case, eventually locating the culprits and rescuing the victim.

- On 11 November, Spanish police detained four Moroccans suspected in the kidnapping of two compatriots. The abduction occurred on 30 September, when the assailants intercepted the victims on a highway between Alicante and Murcia. The victims were then taken to a small property in the town of Fuengirola on the Costa del Sol. The kidnappers tortured the victims and called their families to demand EUR 150,000 per victim. One of the families paid the ransom, while the other reported the incident to the police. The captors were soon located and the hostages rescued. Subsequent investigations determined that the victims were also members of a criminal group.

- In Cyprus, while the crime rate is fairly low, isolated incidents of violent crime can take place. For example, on 16 September, two Cameroonians were arrested in Paphos in connection with the robbery and express kidnapping of a British retiree. The incident took place on 12 September, when four individuals, one of whom was reportedly known to the victim, entered his residence, threatening him and his partner. After stealing valuables, the men took the British man hostage and took him to the bank, where they forced him withdraw over EUR 1,000 from his bank account.

People gather in Paris to pay tribute to the teacher who was beheaded on 16 October. (Photo: Infobae)

MIDDLE EAST

During September and October, the Middle East experienced a decrease of 30% in the number of foreign kidnap victims. This signified a return to the levels previously observed in the region this year. No detentions of vessel crews were recorded in this reporting period. That being said, the security situation in both the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea remains volatile, in the context of the Yemeni war and the Iran-US conflict, respectively. While Iran continues boasting about its offensive capabilities, it is assessed that the Iranian regime will unlikely engage in any outward display of hostility in the near future, as the country is looking to engage in negotiations with the new US administration for a return to the nuclear deal and a possible easing of sanctions, which have had a devastating effect on the Iranian economy. As Iran takes up a spectator seat in this regard, the Islamic regime continues to try to exert maximum control over its population, crushing any indication of dissent, at a time when the regime is being questioned over its poor response to the coronavirus pandemic and the economic crisis. In these circumstances, Iranian intelligence has continued to plot the abduction of opposition figures abroad as well arresting anyone deemed to be acting against Iranian national security, including foreign nationals and dual citizens.

CASES:

- Habib Asyud, vice-president of Iranian opposition group Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Al Ahwaz (ASMLA), was detained in Turkey and handed over to Iran's intelligence services on 30 October. It is unclear if the incident took place with the acquiescence of the Turkish authorities or not, or whether they actively participated in the plot at all. However, some media outlets claimed that the Turkish government arrested Asyud in exchange for two PKK leaders in Iranian custody. The abduction occurred on 9 October, just three hours after Asyud arrived in Istanbul, where he was reportedly in transit. Asyud, who is an Iranian-Swedish dual national, was reportedly lured into Turkey in a scheme that counted with the collaboration of parties in Qatar. News outlets and sources linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) confirmed that Habib Asyud had been taken back to Iran via Azerbaijan. Later, on 11 November, Asyud appeared on Iranian national television accusing himself and his comrades of working for foreign intelligence services and of having carried out terrorist attacks in Iran. Iranian authorities stated that Asyud would receive "maximum punishment". ASMLA is an opposition group based in Ahwaz city, southwestern Iran, which denounces Iran's systematic violation of the rights of the Iranian Arab population and advocates for a separate Arab state in Iran's Khuzestan province. The group, which is listed as a terrorist group by Iran, has been blamed for a series

of terror attacks in the country since 2005, including the September 2018 attack on an Iranian military parade, which killed more than 25 people and injured at least 60.

- Palestinian journalist Ahmad Al-Astal went missing in Turkey on 20 September. According to the journalist's brother, one week before his disappearance, unidentified men broke into his home and stole computers and personal documents. A month later, on 20 October, Turkish state television confirmed Al-Astal's arrest, accusing him of spying on behalf of the United Arab Emirates. Ahmad al-Astal had Jordanian travel documents when he was taken into Turkish custody.

Habib Asyud "confessing" on Iranian national television (Photo: Al Arabiya)

Islamic State attacks in Iraq and Syria have seen an exponential increase throughout 2020, evidencing the resurgence of the group as it strives to retake territory and exercise control over the population and resources. While this had already been seen since the end of 2019, the coronavirus pandemic that caused a drawdown of foreign and local forces, as well as the socio-political crisis in Iraq, aided these efforts, creating security gaps that allowed the organisation to regroup and act almost unimpeded in certain territories. This resurgence, along with a series of high-profile, successful attacks in different parts of the world, have strengthened the brand globally, promoting financing and recruitment, particularly in Syria and Iraq. While the group is still not capable of carrying out the sophisticated attacks of yore, the lack of a unified front to combat it could change this situation in the medium term. Additionally, the security situation in both Syria and Iraq continues to be threatened by a myriad of armed militias, all of which have their own strategic goals and sometimes exert effective control over certain territories. Both militias and IS units engage in kidnapping, whether for funding, as a tool of coercion of local populations, or as bargaining chips. Moreover, these groups are known to coexist or cooperate with local criminal gangs, making it hard to attribute responsibility for these acts to any particular actors. While local nationals are at a higher risk, foreigners are considered more valuable targets.

CASES:

- On 5 September, a detachment of the Iraqi National Security Agency raided an abandoned house in the Cairo neighbourhood of Baghdad, rescuing a kidnap victim. The hostage was identified as a Jordanian national working as a manager for Mercedes Benz who had been kidnapped in the capital three days earlier. Automatic weapons, ammunition, shields and mobile phones belonging to the kidnappers were found during the search. It is not clear if any arrests were made.

- On 28 September 2020, Kurdish forces along with members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (QSD) stormed the 7th section of Hole Camp in Al-Hasakeh, Syria. 15 Iraqi refugees were detained during the raid, accused of killing an Iraqi informer and staging an attack on a Kurdish-manned checkpoint in the area.

- On 23 October, the US mission in Turkey warned Americans of "potential terrorist attacks and kidnappings" in Istanbul and possibly in other Turkish locations. The alert said US citizens and other foreigners could be targeted and specifically mentioned a threat against the US consulate general in Istanbul. As a precaution, all US diplomatic facilities were temporarily closed to the public. While the origin of the threat was not specified, according to local media, the alert was issued after US forces were warned of a threat from al Qaeda in Syria following a recent increase in US airstrikes targeting its operatives. However, since the

publication of the alert, dozens of IS operatives were arrested by the Turkish authorities in different parts of the country, including in the capital, Ankara. It is unclear if the arrests were linked to the alert.

Hole camp in Al-Hasakeh governorate, Syria. (Photo: Crisis Group)

AFRICA

Over the reporting period, kidnapping of foreign nationals in Africa more than doubled, recording its highest level so far this year. This increase was the result of a series of mass kidnappings of foreign workers and migrants in Libya. While the country is mainly divided between two feuding entities, the internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli, and the Benghazi-based Libyan National Army (LNA) headed by General Khalifa Haftar, the reality is that the country is in the hands of a variety of tribal groups and warlords competing for control. Though these groups are aligned with either the LNA or GNA, neither has consolidated central control, creating a highly complex security environment. Compounding this is the intervention of foreign forces, which has only served to protract and exacerbate the conflict. Many of these localised groups have found their main sources of revenue in smuggling, kidnapping and extortion, which they carry out with total impunity. It has been observed that since interception activities increased off Europe, smugglers have increasingly resorted to kidnapping to compensate the loss in revenue. Despite the high risks, Libya continues to be one of the main points of exit towards Mediterranean Europe and an attractive work destination, particularly as the Libyan oil sector has resumed activities since September. Meanwhile, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the security situation in the east of the country remains unstable. There, kidnap for ransom and extortion by armed groups is commonplace, with NGO staff often targeted. The situation is unlikely to improve in the near future. Moreover, in the face of the ongoing instability and the current budgetary and health pressures, strategies for the withdrawal of United Nations' MONUSCO troops are being considered. An outline for the progressive transfer of tasks to the Congolese authorities is in the works, preparing for MONUSCO's eventual exit. This outline is expected to be presented soon, as MONUSCO's mandate is due to be renewed in December.

CASES:

▶ On 8 October, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said that seven Indians had been kidnapped in Libya the previous month. The victims, engineers and technicians working for local oil services company Al Shola Al Mudia, were on their way to Tripoli airport to catch a flight to India when they were abducted near the locality Asshwerif, on 14 September. Relatives of the men claimed that the alleged kidnappers contacted their employer, sending photos of the hostages and demanding a ransom of USD 20,000 per man. On 12 October, the Indian MEA confirmed the release of the seven victims. In its statement, New Delhi thanked the Libyan authorities and local tribal elders for their steadfast cooperation in securing the safe release of the hostages, which took place on 11 October. The conditions of their release were not specified and the abductors were not identified.

▶ A group of aid workers employed by British humanitarian organisation World Vision was ambushed by Mai-Mai militias in Lubero, North Kivu province, on 16 September, as their convoy was returning from a food distribution mission. Two of the aid workers were abducted in the attack, while another was killed and a fourth severely injured. The nationalities of the victims were not ascertained, with the exception of that of the fatal victim, who was identified as a Congolese worker. On 18 September, DRC authorities announced the rescue of the two kidnapped aid workers, which took place with the help of local residents. The hostages were reportedly found inside a building in the locality of Kiranga. At least six other aid workers were kidnapped in different attacks in the same week.

Six Egyptian kidnap victims after their release in Libya's Bani Walid on 10 September. (Photo: Al Awsat)

One of the most notable security incidents over the reporting period was the highly controversial release of four high-profile hostages, including a French national and two Italians, by terrorist group Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) in Mali. Their freedom came just days after the Malian government released over 200 militants, including a number of top jihadi leaders, fuelling fears this could further destabilise the country, and the region as a whole. It was claimed by local sources that a large ransom was also paid for the hostages' release. According to one of the militants released in the exchange, who was later rearrested by the Algerian authorities, EUR 30 million was paid. Other sources alleged that at least EUR 10 million had been provided by the Vatican. While the French government denied any role in the event, the arrested man claimed that the final negotiations had been carried out between French representatives and the group's leader, Iyad Ag Ghali. The exchange was certainly considered an achievement for JNIM, which still holds at least three other foreign hostages as bargaining chips. Thus, the situation in the Sahel is at one of its lowest points, at a time when troops' morale is low, foreign counterterrorism operations are menaced by budgetary pressures, and extremist groups are expanding their operations and spheres of influence. In Mozambique, Islamic terrorism is also gaining ground, threatening security at a regional level. From being a nameless small group carrying out random acts of violence, Ahl al-Sunnah wa al Jamma'ah (ASWJ) has grown impressively in capabilities, sophistication and scope under IS' umbrella. While kidnapping for ransom is not yet one of the group's modi operandi, this cannot be discounted for the future, especially as recent events signal ASWJ's growing emulation of the violent tactics utilised by IS elsewhere in the world. This would especially threaten the developing oil and gas sector in Cabo Delgado. Meanwhile, as government forces are preoccupied by terrorism, an unresolved militancy and the COVID-19 pandemic, kidnapping for ransom continues to grow in Mozambican urban settings.

CASES:

▶ On 8 October, four high-profile JNIM hostages were reunited with family members in Bamako after their release in northern Mali. Among the released was Malian opposition leader Soumaïla Cissé, kidnapped while campaigning for the presidential elections in March 2020, as well as French aid worker Sophie Pétronin, who had been held by the group for almost four years. Two Italian nationals were also released, Pierluigi Maccalli, a Roman Catholic missionary priest kidnapped in Niger in 2018, and Nicola Chiacchio, believed to have been kidnapped while on holiday in the region in 2019. A day after the group's release, the authorities said that Sophie Pétronin had told them that JNIM had murdered Swiss missionary Beatrice Stoeckli a month earlier. The circumstances leading to Stoeckli's execution have not been clarified.

▶ On 13 October, a businessman of Indian origin was shot dead in the Mozambican capital, Maputo, as he resisted an abduction attempt. Amity Samigy was attacked at the intersection of Albert Lithule and Josina Machel avenues just after he had closed his establishment for the day. The businessman was reportedly hit by three bullets after trying to fight off a number of armed individuals who got out of a light truck that blocked his way. Between January and November 2020, the Mozambican authorities have recorded at least 11 abductions targeting businessmen or their family members.

Italians Pierluigi Maccalli (front) and Nicola Chiacchio (back) in Bamako, Mali, after their release by JNIM. (Photo: Crux Now)

ASIA

In September-October 2020, Asia saw an increase in the number of kidnapped foreign nationals. However, the increase is assessed to be within normal parameters of activity in the region. In line with previously observed trends, the vast majority of victims were Chinese nationals, kidnapped in circumstances linked to gambling activities. As a result of the continued increase in such incidents, the Chinese National People's Congress announced in October that it was reviewing an amendment to the country's gambling laws which will officially criminalise overseas entities that attempt to lure Chinese citizens into gambling. The new law would in addition increase penalties for gambling operations in mainland China. This statement follows the announcement in August of the blacklisting of a number of gambling destinations for Chinese nationals, and which according to the Ministry of Culture & Tourism, "endanger the personal and property safety of Chinese citizens". While the Chinese government provided little detail on the said black list, it is possible that travel bans to these destinations could be enacted. It is thought that among the countries that could be affected by these new laws are the Philippines, Cambodia, Vietnam and even Australia. Though the decision is partially based on the increase in violent crime targeting Chinese nationals in these localities, a number of financial analysts believe that the laws could have an ulterior goal, which is that of promoting Macau as the sole recipient of Chinese gambling funds. Additionally, it is possible that this will be yet another tool of political pressure for the Chinese government to use against foreign countries, by threatening them with blacklisting.

CASES:

- On 28 October, police in southwest China's Chongqing municipality announced that, in cooperation with Cambodian authorities, they had rescued seven Chinese victims during raids aimed at disbanding two cross-border kidnap gangs. A total of 121 suspects were arrested during the operations. Police launched investigations into the case in October 2019, after a former victim named Zeng told the police he had been lured into Cambodia with gambling funds and free air tickets offered by a man he met abroad. Zeng said he was abducted as soon as he arrived in Cambodia, and was not let go until his family paid CNY 610,000 (about USD 91,000). Zeng also reported having been held with several other victims. Subsequent investigations found that over 290 people from 29 Chinese provinces had fallen victim to these gangs, which received over CNY 70 million (USD 10.5 million) in ransoms.

- On 27 October, four Chinese nationals and two Filipinos were arrested in Las Piñas city for kidnapping. The operation followed a complaint filed by a Chinese man the previous day. As the authorities raided the place where the plaintiff said he had been held, another Chinese victim was found. The second man claimed he had been held hostage since 20 October. He said

that he worked at an online gambling firm in the city. However, he was not paid, so he decided to quit and go back to China. But when he disclosed his intention to resign, his boss demanded that he pay PHP 240,000 (USD 5,000). When he failed to produce the money, he was kidnapped and assaulted. In addition, the man reported the complainant was brought in on 26 October, but that the man was released the same day after his family paid the ransom.

Three Chinese victims rescued by police in China's Chongqing after their abduction in Cambodia. (Photo: yqqlm.com)

Although it is said that thousands of kidnappings take place in India every year, only a small fraction of them are actually for ransom. Kidnapping for ransom in India rarely affects foreign nationals, typically targeting rich businessmen and their dependants. However, with the boom in the Indian economy in recent years, members of India's middle class are increasingly being affected, as they are perceived to be more accessible targets. Although the country has a number of organised crime syndicates, kidnapping for ransom in India is commonly orchestrated by individuals known to the victims. In many instances, they are motivated by some sort of grudge, following a personal or financial dispute. A different situation is observed in neighbouring Pakistan, where kidnap for ransom is commonplace, carried out not only by resentful individuals, but also by criminal groups of all levels, as well as militant groups. Most kidnappings target locals perceived to be wealthy, including returning Pakistani expatriates. NGO workers are also common targets. However, foreign citizens should remain vigilant at all times, as they are viewed as being more valuable, with a potential additional risk of being sold on to militant elements.

CASES:

- On 27 October, five men wearing burqas kidnapped a dentist from a hospital he owns in Telangana's Ranga Reddy district. After taking the victim to the state capital, Hyderabad, the kidnappers contacted the victim's family and demanded a ransom of IRN 100 million (over USD 1.3 million) in bitcoins. Subsequently, the doctor was handed over to four other members of the gang, who took him to Bengaluru, in the neighbouring state of Karnataka. The victim was rescued the next day after police traced the car in which he was taken away. Seven suspects have so far been arrested, including the mastermind, who is a relative of the victim's wife. It is believed that the man was targeted because, in addition to the hospital, he owns several other properties.

- Bengaluru police are searching for a Rohingya youth who was allegedly kidnapped for ransom after his family failed to pay a 'hafta' (protection money) for living in a slum in the area of Dasarahalli. According to the police, the man was abducted on 31 October, along with five other individuals from the same colony, during an extortion collection drive carried out by a criminal group. The other five men were reportedly released after their families managed to pay the INR 40,000 (USD 540) demanded. Statements made by the released victims allowed the police to locate the criminals' hideout. However, by the time the raid took place, the kidnappers and the missing person were no longer there.

- Unidentified gunmen in Pakistan kidnapped two local employees of a government-funded NGO in the Makeen area of South Waziristan, on 22 October. The two employees of Sarhad Rural Support Programme, one of the largest local NGOs working in north-western Pakistan, were on their way back to Makeen after inspecting a water supply programme in Qalandar Kallay when their vehicle was intercepted by a group of armed men. According to investigations, the kidnappers had been following their targets before the attack.
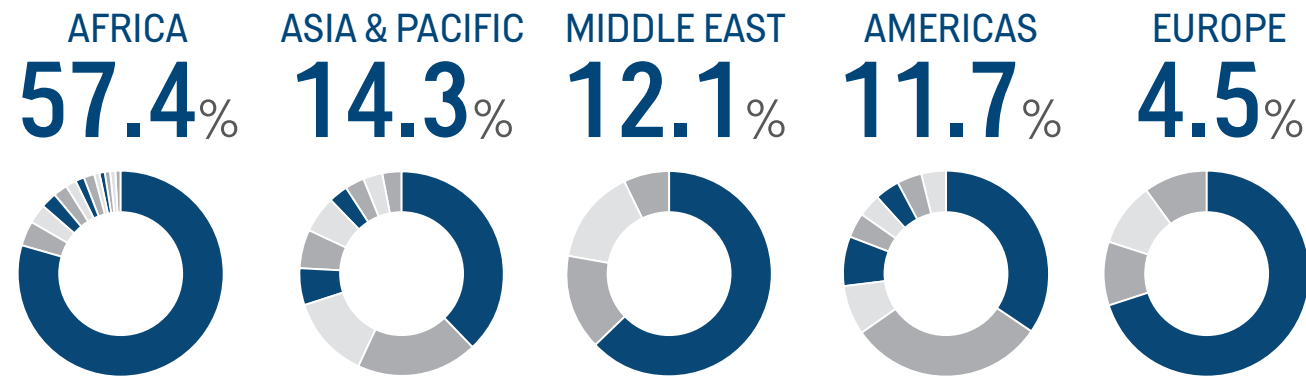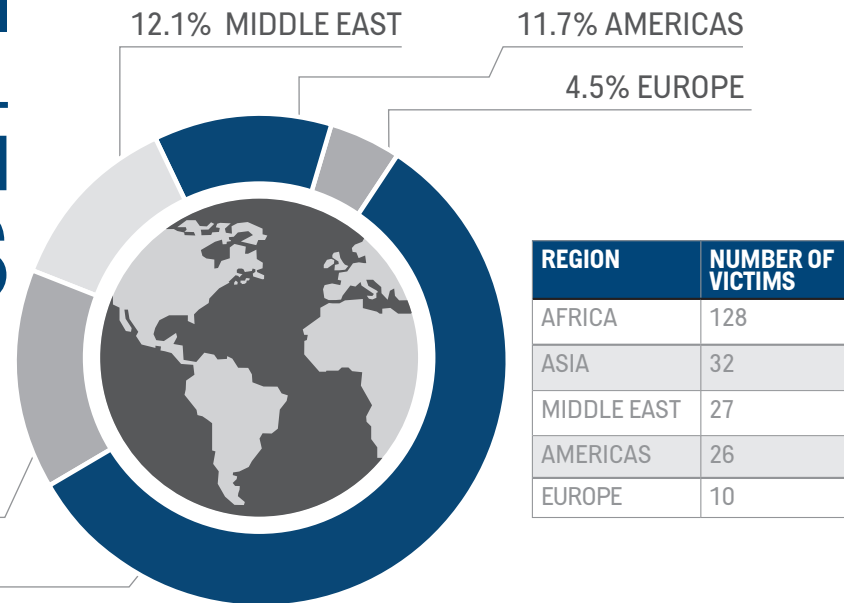

Rohingya camp in Dasarahall, Bengaluru. (Photo: India Today)

STATISTICS

KIDNAPPED FOREIGN CITIZENS

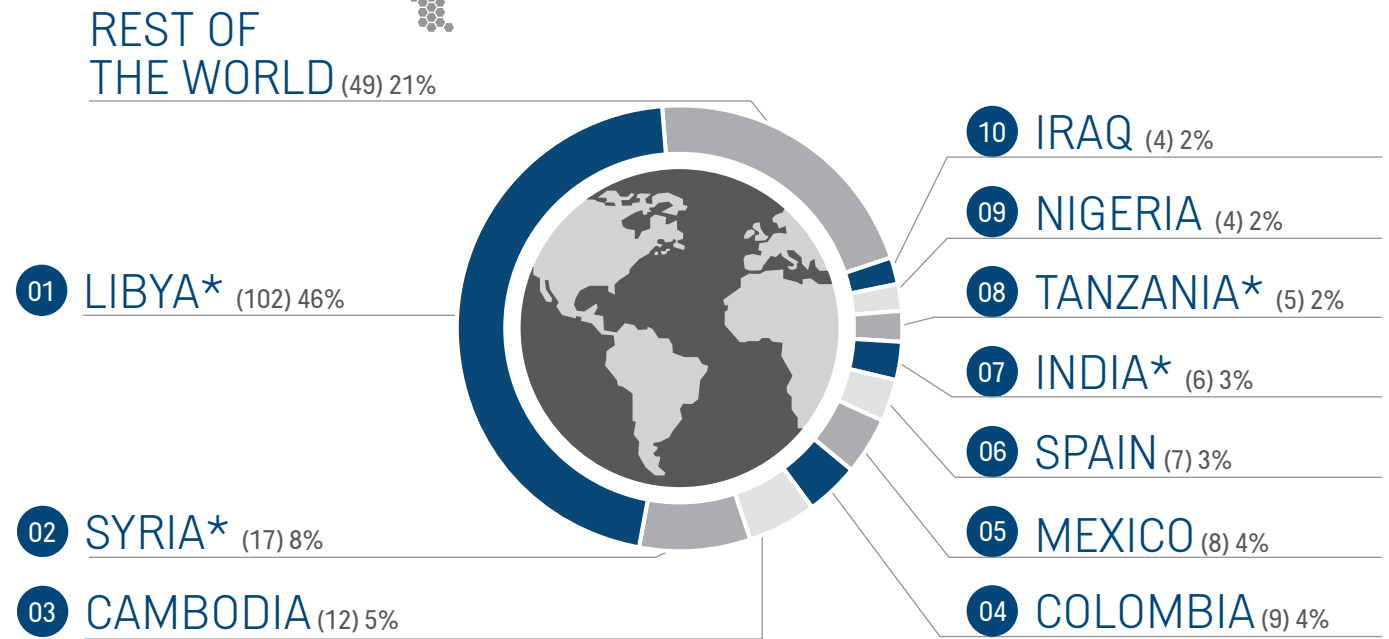### Global AND Regional GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF VICTIMS

Statistics for September-October 2020 are drawn from Constellis' record of 223 kidnapped foreign nationals. Over July-August 2020, Constellis recorded a total of 195 foreign nationals kidnapped across the world.
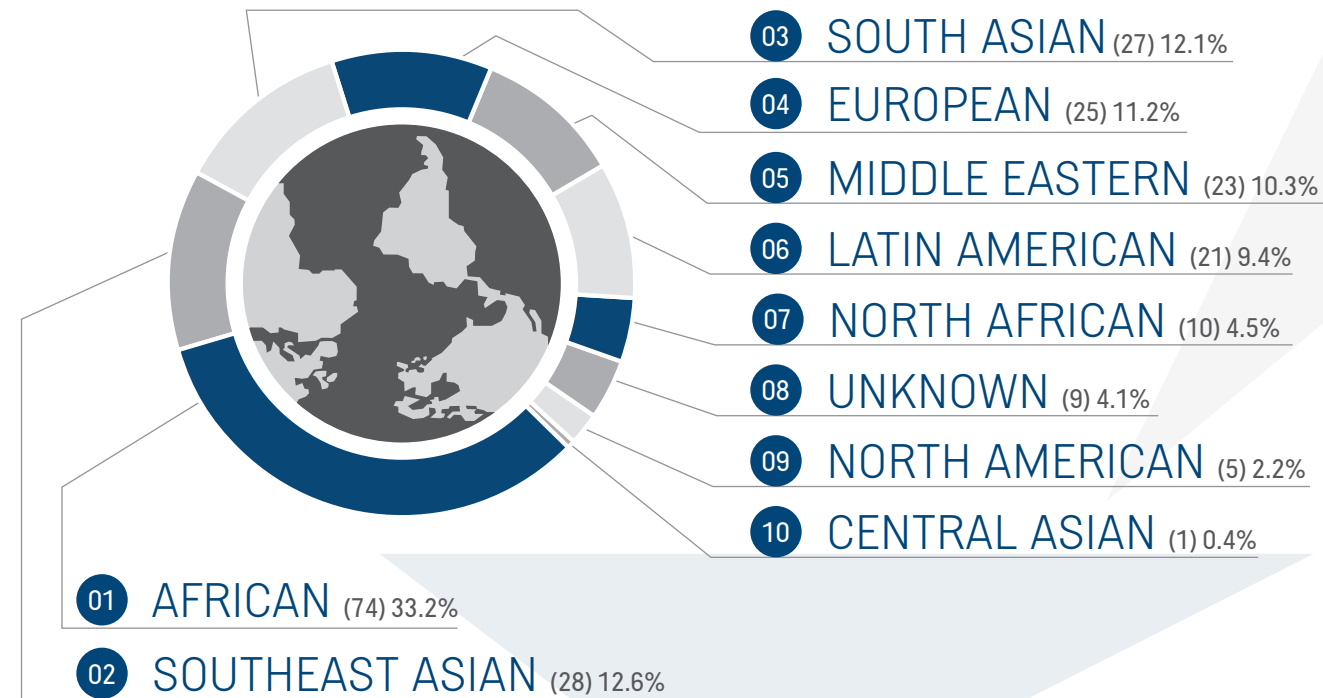
12.1% MIDDLE EAST 11.7% AMERICAS 4.5% EUROPE

14.3% ASIA & PACIFIC

57.4% AFRICA

REGION	NUMBER OF VICTIMS
AFRICA	128
ASIA	32
MIDDLE EAST	27
AMERICAS	26
EUROPE	10

AFRICA	ASIA & PACIFIC	MIDDLE EAST	AMERICAS	EUROPE
57.4%	**14.3%**	**12.1%**	**11.7%**	**4.5%**

AFRICA	ASIA & PACIFIC	MIDDLE EAST	AMERICAS	EUROPE
Libya* (102) 79.6%	Cambodia* (12) .. 38%	Syria* (17) 63%	Colombia (9) 34.6%	Spain (7) 70%
Tanzania* (5)........ 3.9%	India* (6) 19%	Iraq (4) 15%	Mexico (8) 30.8%	Ukraine* (1) 10%
Nigeria (4) 3.1%	Philippines (4)..... 13%	UAE (4) 15%	Venezuela (2) 7.8%	Belarus (1).......... 10%
SA (3)..................... 2.3%	Pakistan (2)........... 6%	Turkey (2) 7%	T & T (2) 7.8%	Cyprus (1)............ 10%
South Sudan (3) 2.3%	China (2)................. 6%		Ecuador (1)......... 3.1%	
Kenya* (2) 1.6%	Armenia (2) 6%		Guatemala (1) 3.8%	
Morocco* (2)........ 1.6%	Malaysia (1)........... 3%		US (1).................. 3.8%	
EG (2)..................... 1.6%	New Zealand (1).... 3%		Bolivia (1) 3.8%	
DRC* (1)............... 0.8%	Australia (1)........... 3%		Peru (1) 3.8%	
Ivory Coast (1) 0.8%	Taiwan (1).............. 3%			
Mozambique (1)..... 0.8%				
Tunisia (1).............. 0.8%				
Nigeria (1) 0.8%				

SA = South Africa
EG = Equatorial Guinea
T & T = Trinidad & Tobago

(Number of Victims)
* Including Migrants

TOP 10 COUNTRIES
FOR THE KIDNAPPING OF FOREIGN CITIZENS IN SEP-OCT 2020

REST OF THE WORLD (49) 21%

01 LIBYA* (102) 46%

02 SYRIA* (17) 8%

03 CAMBODIA (12) 5%

10 IRAQ (4) 2%

09 NIGERIA (4) 2%

08 TANZANIA* (5) 2%

07 INDIA* (6) 3%

06 SPAIN (7) 3%

05 MEXICO (8) 4%

04 COLOMBIA (9) 4%

REGIONAL ORIGINS OF VICTIMS

- 03 SOUTH ASIAN (27) 12.1%
- 04 EUROPEAN (25) 11.2%
- 05 MIDDLE EASTERN (23) 10.3%
- 06 LATIN AMERICAN (21) 9.4%
- 07 NORTH AFRICAN (10) 4.5%
- 08 UNKNOWN (9) 4.1%
- 09 NORTH AMERICAN (5) 2.2%
- 10 CENTRAL ASIAN (1) 0.4%
- 01 AFRICAN (74) 33.2%
- 02 SOUTHEAST ASIAN (28) 12.6%

VICTIMS BY SECTOR

- MARITIME (22) 9.9%
- UNSKILLED (18) 8.1%
- BUSINESSPEOPLE (10) 4.5%
- OTHER (8) 3.1%
- OIL & GAS (7) 3.1%
- EDUCATION (4) 1.9%
- PROFESSIONALS (4) 1.9%
- DEPENDENT (3) 1.3%
- JOURNALISM (2) 0.9%
- TOURISM (2) 0.9%
- NGO (1) 0.4%
- RELIGIOUS (1) 0.4%
- CONSTRUCTION (1) 0.4%
- CRIMINAL (1) 0.4%
- UNKNOWN (39) 17.5%
- MIGRANTS (101) 45.3%

MOST VICTIMIZED SINGLE NATIONALITY

- 01 Chinese
- 02 Iraqi
- 03 Venezuelan
- 04 Indian
- 05 Bangladeshi
- 06 Italian
- 07 Egyptian
- 08 Burundian
- 09 Burmese
- 10 Tunisian

MOST VICTIMIZED ORIGIN BY REGION

REGION	ORIGIN
Africa	Africans
Americas	Latin Americans
Asia & Pacific	Southeast Asians
Europe	Southeast Asians
Middle East	Middle Eastern
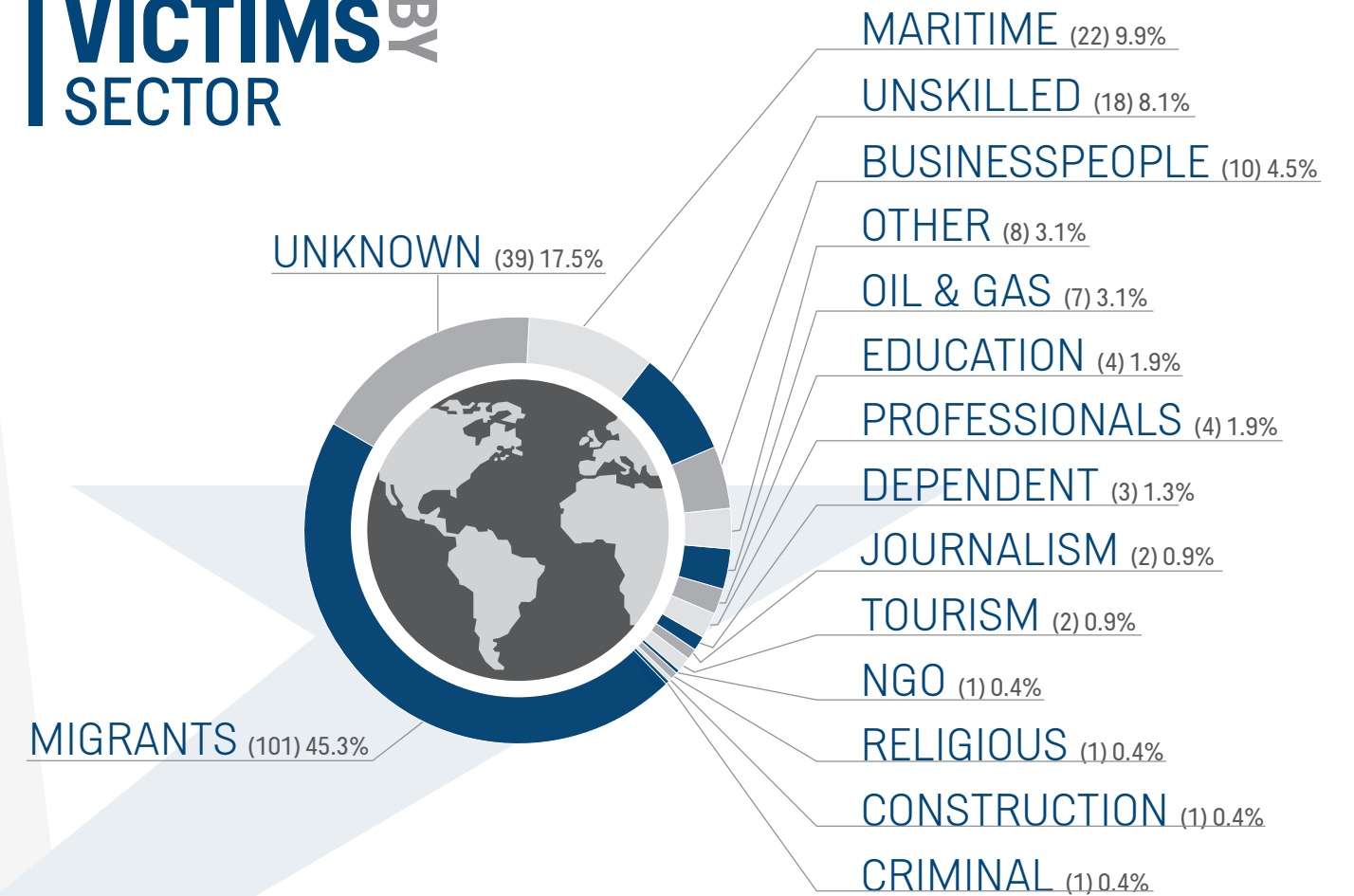
MOST VICTIMIZED SECTOR BY REGION

REGION	OCCUPATIONAL SECTOR
Africa	Migrants
Americas	Unknown
Asia & Pacific	Migrants
Europe	Unknown
Middle East	Migrants

DISCLAIMER: These statistics herein presented are the result of a compilation of kidnapping incidents involving foreign nationals only, which have been reported in the media and other open sources. The information contained and its results are therefore partial as result of the incomplete nature of open-source material. Thus, this report should be taken only as a reference of general trends, taking its limitations into consideration.

STATISTICS

Global AND Regional GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF VICTIMS

Statistics for November 2019 - October 2020 are drawn from Constellis' record of 1,213 foreign nationals kidnapped worldwide.
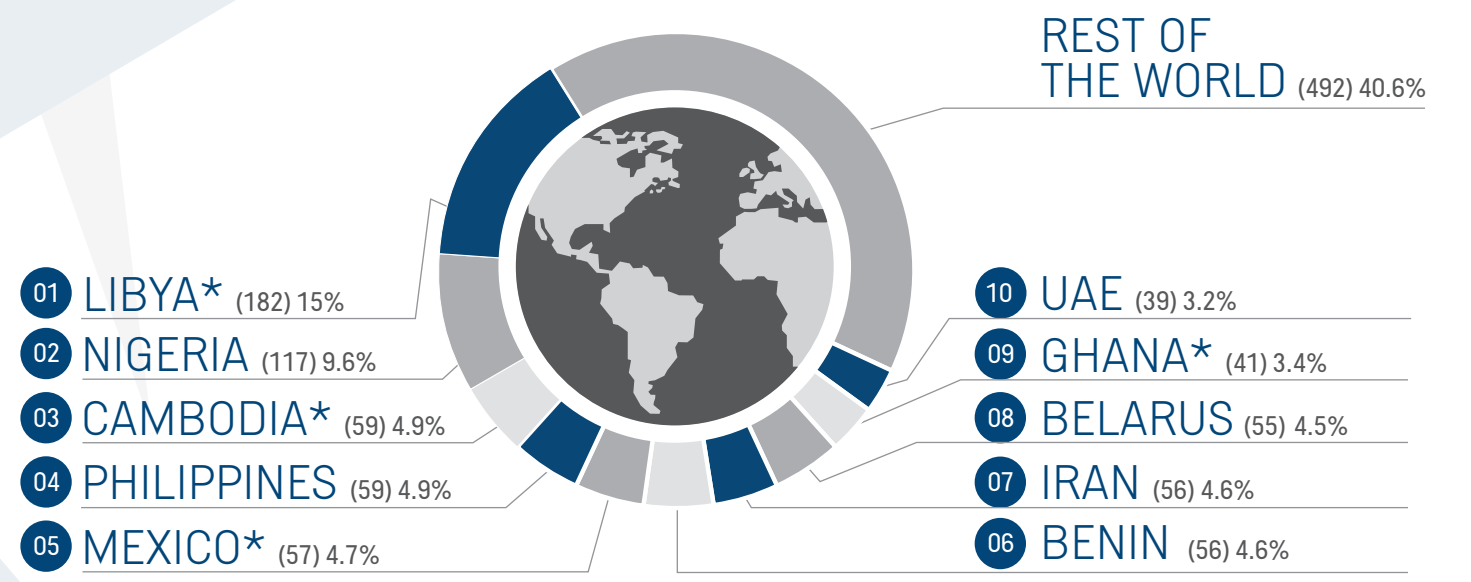
7.3% EUROPE
47.3% AFRICA
10.9% AMERICAS
17.1% MIDDLE EAST
17.4% ASIA & PACIFIC

REGION	NUMBER OF VICTIMS
AFRICA	574
ASIA & PACIFIC	211
MIDDLE EAST	208
AMERICAS	132
EUROPE	88

AFRICA
47.3%

Libya* (182) 31.7%
Nigeria (117) 20.3%
Benin (56) 9.8%
Ghana* (41) 7.1%
Togo (24) 4.2%
Gabon (20) 3.5%
Guinea (20) 3.5%
Tanzania* (15) .. 2.6%
Chad (13)............ 2.3%
Mozambique (12).. 2.1%
Others* (74) 12.9%

ASIA & PACIFIC
17.4%

Cambodia* (59)... 28%
Philippines (59)... 28%
Pakistan* (35) .. 16.6%
Malaysia (14)...... 6.6%
India* (9) 4.3%
China (8) 3.8%
Myanmar (8)........ 3.8%
Papua New Guinea (6) ..2.8%
Afghanistan (3)... 1.4%
Georgia (2).......... 0.9%
Others (8)............ 3.8%

MIDDLE EAST
17.1%

Iran (56) 26.9%
UAE (39) 18.8%
Lebanon* (35).... 16.8%
Syria* (32) 15.4%
Yemen (19) 9.1%
Iraq (15) 7.2%
Turkey (4) 1.9%
Saudi Arabia (3) ... 1.4%
Kuwait (2) 1%
Qatar (2).................. 1%
Others (1) 0.5%

AMERICAS
10.9%

Mexico* (57) 43.2%
Colombia (15) 11.4%
Trinidad & Tobago* (12) . 9.1%
Venezuela (10) 7.6%
US* (9) 6.8%
Haiti (4) 3%
Honduras (4) 3%
Uruguay* (4) 3%
Ecuador (3) 2.3%
Paraguay (3)......... 2.3%
Others* (11) 8.3%

EUROPE
7.3%

Belarus (55) 62.5%
Spain (10)............. 11.4%
Russia (6) 6.8%
Cyprus* (4).............. 4.6%
Ukraine* (3) 3.4%
Ireland (3)............... 3.4%
Greece (2) 2.3%
UK (2) 2.3%
Sweden (1)............. 1.1%
Lithuania (1)........... 1.1%
Others (1) 1.%

(Number of Victims)
* Including Migrants

TOP 10 COUNTRIES
TOP 10 COUNTRIES FOR THE KIDNAPPING OF FOREIGN CITIZENS IN NOV 2019 - OCT 2020

REST OF THE WORLD (492) 40.6%

01 LIBYA* (182) 15%
02 NIGERIA (117) 9.6%
03 CAMBODIA* (59) 4.9%
04 PHILIPPINES (59) 4.9%
05 MEXICO* (57) 4.7%

10 UAE (39) 3.2%
09 GHANA* (41) 3.4%
08 BELARUS (55) 4.5%
07 IRAN (56) 4.6%
06 BENIN (56) 4.6%

GLOBAL PIRACY UPDATE

During September and October 2020, Constellis recorded 74 maritime security indents, representing an increase of 11% from the last reporting period (July – August). The majority of incidents consisted of suspicious approaches and attempted robberies (50%), followed by low-profile thefts (45%). Additionally, two successful kidnappings were recorded in the Gulf of Guinea (GOG). It is likely that maritime crime incidents will continue increasing throughout November and December as weather conditions improve, facilitating pirate activity.

While piracy in the Americas persisted, mainly consisting of low-level thefts, activity off Ecuador was notorious due to its increasing levels of violence. Over the reporting period, a number of foreign vessels were the target of violent attacks when transiting through Guayaquil port's narrow river passage. As a result of the spike in attacks in the area, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) issued on 11 November a warning to ships operating through the river passage, particularly at night-time. In other developments, seven Nigerian stowaways were detained by British Special Forces on 25 October, after they hijacked the oil tanker NAVE ANDROMEDA off the coast of Isle of Wight as it was approaching its final destination, Southampton. The men, who most likely hijacked the ship with the aim of claiming asylum in the UK, were released on bail a few days later. This is not the first time such an incident has occurred in the area. For example, in December 2018, cargo ship GRANDE TEMA was hijacked by four stowaways who attempted to take the vessel towards Tilbury before Special Forces intervened. Given the current economic situation in many parts of the world, incidents of similar nature are possible in the wider European region.

Although there were no incidents of piracy registered across the Gulf of Aden (GOA) and the wider East Africa region, attempted robberies and suspicious approaches persisted in the region, evidencing the latent threat. A recent threat assessment carried out by EU NAVFOR Somalia and other forces securing the area concluded that while at present there is a low risk of piracy attacks as pirate action groups (PAGs) have diversified their activities, they certainly retain the capability to launch attacks. Moreover, the third quarter of the year is one of the busiest times for small fishing craft in the region, as the monsoon season is over. This increase in dhow traffic in the GOA presents increased opportunities for pirates and criminals carrying out robberies near ports. As a result, military patrols have seen an increase since October, in order to monitor the region for possible pirate activity. On 21 September, Somali pirates freed their final three hostages. The men were crewmembers of the Iranian fishing vessel SIRAJ, who were abducted off the coast of Hobyo, Somalia, in March 2015. According to records, between 2007 and 2015, over 3,000 maritime personnel were taken hostages by Somali pirates. While maritime incidents in the GOA have decreased to approximately 95% of the levels recorded at its peak, factors favouring piracy in the region remain in place, meaning that given the opportunity, this issue could easily resurface. A threat to maritime security is also present off Yemen, as a result of the ongoing conflict. The most conspicuous threat arises from the use of missiles and WBIEDs (water-borne improvised explosive devices), which could impact commercial shipping vessels, either due to misidentification or having been linked to any of the warring parties.

Incidents across the Gulf of Guinea (GOG) recorded a 25% increase with respect to the last reporting period. This was partially cyclical, linked to post-monsoon weather conditions. As per established trends, most of the incidents consisted of attempted boardings and low-profile thefts. However, only two successful kidnappings, with three victims in total, were recorded over the September-October period. Nonetheless, the region remains the top hotspot for pirate activity. Indeed, a report by the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) showed that kidnappings in the region rose by 40% during the first nine months of this year, when compared to the same period last year. With at least 80 crewmembers taken hostage in the GOG between January and September 2020, West African waters now account for 95% of global maritime kidnappings. A notable development throughout 2020 has been the frequency of attacks further out at sea, where, contrary to persisting views among operators, vessels find themselves vulnerable given that help takes longer to arrive. This tactic, besides being effective, evidences the increasing sophistication of pirate groups in the region. Moreover, attacks have also been registered on vessels with embarked security, denoting both the capabilities of PAGs in the area and the poor performance of locally available security. As a result, in mid-November the risk to maritime operations in the GoG High Risk Area (HRA) was raised to critical. Given that weather conditions will continue to improve and that the December festive period is approaching, it is expected that kidnapping attempts will continue to increase.

Maritime crime across Asia continues to rise, with the vast majority of incidents being CAT-4 events, consisting of small thefts and attempted robberies, particularly in the vicinity of the Singapore Straits. For a consecutive period, no kidnappings were recorded in Southeast Asia. However, on 3 November, the Philippine Special Forces said they had neutralised an Abu Sayyaf (ASG) unit plotting kidnapping operations from the locality of Parang in Sulu, a well-known departure point for ASG's activities at sea. This incident is further evidence of the latent kidnapping threat in the area, and which has compelled Malaysian authorities to retain the night curfew in waters off Sabah. Meanwhile, tension in the South China Sea continues to rise, particularly after a Chinese coastguard vessel was spotted in the vicinity of one of Indonesia's islands on 12 September.

Nigerian Naval Special Forces during an exercise in the GOG. (Photo: Sputnik News)

CASES:

- On 3 October, the Maltese-flagged Aframax tanker SYRA hit what was described as a sea mine while loading products at Yemen's Hush Al Nishaimah oil terminal, suffering sizeable damage that resulted in an oil spill. Eyewitnesses reported that during the loading operation, a number of suspicious floating objects were seen drifting towards the tanker before they exploded. No group claimed responsibility for the attack. However, it is presumed that the mines were linked to the ongoing confrontation between the Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC).

- Two Russian crew members were kidnapped from the Dutch reefer WATER PHOENIX about 30 nm south of Lagos, Nigeria, on 8 September. One of the victims was identified as the vessel's master. The men were freed on 31 October, after eight weeks in captivity. While not confirmed, it is highly likely that the men were released following the payment of a ransom.

- On 29 September, Philippine soldiers in Sulu recovered the body of an Indonesian man held by the ASG for eight months. The body was found following an armed encounter with an ASG cell led by Majan Sahidjuan (also known as Apo Mike), in Barangay Maligaya, Patikul. According to military reports, the victim saw the encounter as an opportunity to escape, but was seen and shot by his captors. The authorities confirmed that the cadaver belonged to La Baa, one of five Indonesians kidnapped by the ASG off Malaysia's Tambisan Island on 16 January 2020. The remaining victims are still missing. According to local reports, the ASG initially demanded a ransom of PHP 30 million (over USD 621,000) for the release of the group.

CYBER SECURITY

MARITIME CYBER THREATS, THREE YEARS ON

Since Constellis' last update on the threat of cybercrime to the maritime sector, in December 2017, cyberattacks against the industry have risen by approximately 900%. According to recent studies, the number of confirmed attacks against maritime operational technology (OT) systems in 2020 is set to reach 500 by the end of the year, while many more will go unreported. This represents a significant jump from last year, when 310 major breaches were recorded, up from 120 in 2018 and 50 in 2017. With OT hacks increasing rapidly, the limelight has once again fallen on the maritime sector in the wake of several notable attacks against international shipping giants, as well as the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) itself.

As in 2017, the maritime sector remains the most essential medium for global trade. Given its significant value to the world economy, it is unsurprisingly a highly attractive proposition for cybercriminals. While shipping companies have come a long way in updating their antiquated IT systems to better protect them from cybercrime, the industry as a whole remains vulnerable due to a variety of factors. These vulnerabilities, combined with the importance and worth of the industry, have both contributed to this spiralling trend in cyberattacks.

Operational naval software and hardware for vessels and ship terminals were originally designed to be standalone, but increased connectivity between various systems in recent years has massively amplified the avenues of attack. These include operational, navigational and tracking systems, which also communicate between vessels, ports and government agencies, amongst others. With added layers of connectivity come increased vulnerabilities, particularly due to reliance upon third party suppliers and contractors. On top of this, while ships' IT systems can be attacked, it is the shipping companies' shore-based networks that are often more susceptible, again due to the use of third parties and poor staff cyber security training.

Attacks against maritime targets can take a variety of forms and are carried out by an array of assailants, from cybercriminals and terrorists to state actors, activists, and potentially competitors. By hacking vessels' navigation and machinery control systems, attackers can cause ships to go off course and even malfunction, with the potential for loss of cargo and even loss of life. Meanwhile, cyberattacks against onshore IT infrastructure are not unlike attacks against IT systems in other sectors. However, in the case of the maritime industry, attacks against shore-based networks can be used to spread malware to vessels, or to steal manifests and container ID numbers, which can in turn be used by maritime pirates. These vast shipping company data stores can also be hacked and held to ransom.

Indeed, data theft and ransomware attacks are the some of the highest profile and economically devastating. Since 2017, all four of the world's largest shipping companies have been breached with large-scale ransomware infections; APM-Maersk in 2017, COSCO Shipping Lines in 2018, Mediterranean Shipping Company in April 2020 and CMA CGM in September 2020, all of which are believed to have cost them hundreds of millions of dollars in remediation efforts, not to mention serious reputational damage.

Port infrastructure is similarly assessed to be at risk from high-impact cyberattacks. According to findings published by cyber risk specialists last year, in an extreme scenario where 15 Asian ports were hypothetically simultaneously hacked, losses of approximately USD 110 billion to global markets would occur.

Industry leaders have identified a number of ways in which shipping companies can improve cyber security in the maritime sector. Just as vessels are inspected and maintained to ensure their sea-worthiness, IT infrastructure should be continually monitored, particularly when it interfaces with external networks such as port terminals. Additionally, improved cyber security intelligence sharing amongst industry stakeholders and governments should be implemented to ensure that operators have a real-time overview of maritime cyber threats. These key areas are currently deemed to be in need of attention, as is general cyber security awareness amongst personnel in the industry. Cyber security experts have long warned that the maritime sector would become the next 'playground' for cybercriminals. While this is coming to fruition, key industry agencies and stakeholders still appear to be lagging behind developments.

CASES:

▶ On 1 October 2020, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) was impacted by a sophisticated cyberattack that temporarily brought down its website and intranet. The IMO, the UN agency responsible for regulating shipping, had to shut down key systems to prevent the virus from spreading further. The timing of the attack was unfortunate, taking place as the organisation is preparing new cyber security guidelines for shipping companies.

▶ On 28 September 2020, French shipping and container transportation company CMA CGM was struck by the 'Ragner Locker' ransomware, affecting several of its Chinese offices. A note demanding an undisclosed ransom was sent by the attackers, demanding payment in return for a decryption key that would restore the locked systems. CMA CGM subsequently shut down its network to prevent the malware from spreading, with all networks and offices restored and fully operational by 11 October, according to a company statement. It is unknown if any ransom payment was made.

▶ On 9 April 2020, a container ship named 'Fouma' was attacked by pirates while sailing off the coast of Ecuador. The assailants opened 15 containers containing high-value goods, managing to steal some of the cargo before being repelled and forced to flee.

It is believed that, given the precision of the attack and the fact that specific containers were looted, the pirates and their accomplices had likely hacked data regarding the Fouma's route and cargo, prior to boarding the vessel.
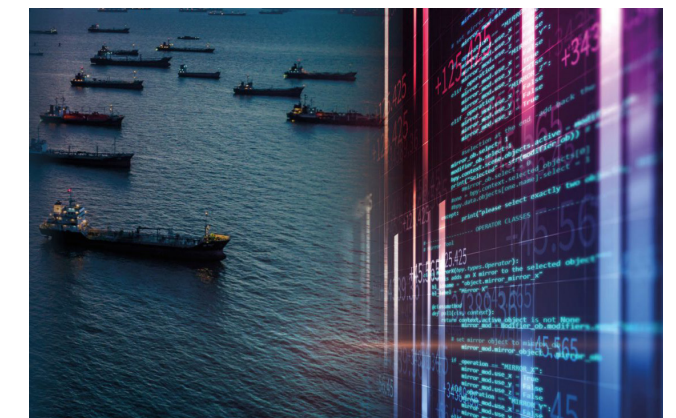
(Photo: Shipip.com)

FOCUS ARTICLE

COVID-19 AND EXTREMISM
By Gabriela Pimpireva

Despite expectations that the Covid-19 outbreak might have the effect of reducing the threat posed by extremist groups, recent developments have pointed towards the opposite being the case. Extremist groups were quick to use the chaos surrounding the pandemic to their advantage. Both Islamic extremists and white supremacists have sought to use the pandemic to ramp up their recruitment efforts to boost their following and find supporters willing to stage attacks. In addition, the lockdown measures have presented a significant challenge to counter-terrorism operations and law-enforcement agencies.

Perhaps the most obvious result of the pandemic is the increase in the spread of propaganda online, which has seen a sharp uptick as people are spending more time online due to the various movement restrictions. These groups seek to spread their ideology and gain more supporters by exploiting people's insecurities, vulnerabilities and grievances by creating a narrative that convinces them that other people are to blame for their problems. These issues may include financial struggles, job insecurity, and health problems caused by the pandemic. For example, terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda (AQ) have claimed that the virus is a 'divine punishment' from God against apostates. Of particular concern during this period has been the radicalisation of younger people, such as students. They are thought easier to manipulate, and are at higher risk due to their extensive exposure to material on the web, as their education and social interaction were shifted online due to the pandemic. In sum, the spike in online activity from terrorist organisations observed since the start of the pandemic may result in an increase in the risk of radicalisation in the short- to medium-term. While the exact figures of how many people have been radicalised are as yet unknown, some cases of radicalisation linked to the coronavirus pandemic are already being reported. For instance, in September, the UK's Metropolitan Police assistant commissioner stated that there were approximately 800 live investigations into radicalisation, with children as young as 13 being investigated for expressing the will to commit terrorist acts, a trend that had not been observed prior to the pandemic. Moreover, according to a London-based think tank that monitors extremism and disinformation, a white supremacist online group grew its user base from 300 to over 2,700 users in the month after the pandemic began, which represents a growth of 800%.

Another consequence of the coronavirus pandemic may be a shift in targets for terrorist attacks, due to movement restrictions in a number of countries. It is possible that because of these restrictions, traditional targeting of public spaces that attract large crowds, such as markets, places of worship, and indoor and outdoor gatherings, may be replaced by the targeting of health infrastructure, or essential businesses such as supermarkets. IS explicitly called on its supporters to attack places that appear to be the most vulnerable. An example of this threat was reported in May, when IS carried out an armed attack on a hospital's maternity ward in Kabul, Afghanistan, leaving 24 civilians dead. Other pre-planned attacks targeting medical facilities were also observed in other countries. A man in Missouri, US, was killed in a shootout with the FBI after police discovered his plans to carry out a mass attack at a hospital where coronavirus patients were being treated. FBI officials later stated that before the coronavirus outbreak, the man was thinking of attacking either a mosque or a synagogue.

Some attacks were also observed across Europe, Asia and the US, after right-wing hate groups encouraged their supporters to conduct attacks by using the virus as a biological weapon and spreading it intentionally. According to the FBI, in March, several racist extremist groups including neo-Nazis encouraged their followers who contracted the coronavirus to spread the contagion to policemen and Jews. The groups told their members to use spray bottles to spread bodily fluids onto their targets on the streets and at synagogues. In addition, xenophobic attacks also increased, particularly aimed at Asian communities. In Italy, for example, there were at least 50 reports of assault or verbal harassment against people of Asian descent in February alone. Similarly, UK reports showed that crime directed at Asian communities rose by 21% after the virus began to spread in the country. Xenophobic attacks have also been evident online, with recent reports suggesting that since the pandemic began, there has been a 900% increase in hashtags identified as 'hateful' directed against Asian people.

Meanwhile, the coronavirus pandemic has certainly negatively impacted counter-terrorism operations. While on the one hand jihadist groups released messages to their supporters urging them to show no mercy and launch attacks during the crisis, on the other, governments were forced to redeploy their troops to help enforce the measures established to control the epidemic. Likewise, a decrease in international support was also observed, as many countries recalled their troops due to fears of contagion and a lack of quality health services in the countries of deployment. For instance, several European countries temporarily pulled out troops from Iraq and Afghanistan in late March, after NATO and Coalition training missions were suspended in order to prevent the potential spread of the coronavirus. Similarly, after news broke that there were approximately 4,000 confirmed cases of coronavirus within the French Armed Forces, French authorities were required to alter the rotation of French troops stationed in the Sahel. Terrorist groups were quick to exploit this security vacuum, launching new offensives. An interesting case was observed in Chad, where only four days after the country confirmed its first coronavirus cases in March, Boko Haram launched a large-scale attack killing nearly 100 local soldiers in Boma, Lac province. The attack was so severe that it ultimately forced Chad's President to recall troops to Lake Chad, abandoning the country's COVID-19 response. It cannot be discounted that a second spike of coronavirus cases in Europe could once again temporarily limit operations against terrorist organisations, if foreign troops shift their attention and resources to their own domestic needs.

While the long-term effects the pandemic has had on terrorist organisations are as yet unclear, it has certainly presented a series of challenges in the global fight against terrorism. The immediate repercussions are the uptick in attacks and increased recruitment, putting even more pressure on the already overwhelmed counter-terrorism systems. Hate groups in the US and Europe could also gain more support, particularly as extremists utilise conspiracy theories in order to foster division within communities and gain a larger following. The ongoing socio-economic impact from the pandemic is also likely to keep furthering these trends as the world enters into a second wave of the pandemic with no vaccine yet available.

A propaganda poster published by IS-supporting Ribat Media praising the coronavirus. (Photo: Homeland Security Today)

ABOUT CONSTELLIS

Constellis is a leading provider of risk management, humanitarian, social intelligence, training and operational support services to government and commercial clients throughout the world. Operating in over 45 countries, Constellis' 20,000 employees bring unparalleled dedication and passion for creating a safer world by upholding the highest standards of compliance, quality, and integrity.

Constellis' forward thinking services span a broad range of synergistic solutions, from the boardroom to the project site, encompassing risk governance, organisational resilience, business continuity management, crisis management, travel security, global tracking, training, protective security, life support, logistics and specialist support such as K9 services and UAV systems.

At Constellis, our number one mission is to secure success for our customers. Constellis combines the legacy capabilities and experience of ACADEMI, Triple Canopy, Centerra, Olive Group, OmniPlex, AMK9, Edinburgh International, Strategic Social and all of their affiliates. The consolidation of companies under the Constellis name allows our clients to rely on one single partner and project experience that spans the globe.

For more information about Constellis, please visit our website at: www.constellis.com

Constellis' intelligence analysts and security consultants produce bespoke political and security reports, threat assessments and security risk assessments to inform decisions and to protect people and assets across the world.

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