

# KIDNAP+ RANSOM INSIGHT

GLOBAL SUMMARY

FOCUS  
ARTICLE  
**KIDNAP FOR  
RANSOM IN HAITI**

January



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## SUMMARY

This issue of Constellis' Kidnap for Ransom Insight Report covers global kidnapping incidents and trends for the months of November and December 2020, as well as January 2021. 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 November and December 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, statistical information for the year 2020 can be found on page 17.

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

The Cyber Security section examines current issues affecting companies and individuals in the realm of IT security. This edition provides a cyber security review for 2020 and an outlook for 2021. Cyber crime surged over 2020, accelerated by confusion surrounding the coronavirus crisis. With more employees working

from home and organisations scrambling to amend their IT infrastructure accordingly, cyber criminals took advantage of the security gaps that emerged. Attacks against businesses grew by 20% over the year, with ransomware infections and data breaches amongst the most costly. The health sector was hit particularly hard, as hackers sought to exploit essential services linked to tackling COVID-19. While criminal actors are believed to have been behind most attacks, an increasing trend in state-sponsored cyber warfare was also observed, with experts forecasting that state hacking will pose one of the greatest threats to enterprises in 2021.

The Focus Article examines the kidnapping problem in Haiti, a common feature in the country's recent history, due to a series of structural problems including underdevelopment, high levels of corruption and impunity. Its most recent cycle developed through 2020, linked to socio-political instability and the economic crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to unofficial sources, nearly 3,000 kidnap cases were registered over the past year, of which a number have been foreign nationals. As a result of the worsening security situation in Haiti, several Western governments have revised their travel advice for the country, increasing threat ratings and consequently travel restrictions, with some advising against all travel to the country. This issue is expected to persist over 2021 as the climate of insecurity continues to worsen, with the security forces appearing unable to control the rampant criminality and violence created by local gangs.

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# GLOBAL OVERVIEW

## AMERICAS

Over the last two months of 2020, the Americas experienced a significant increase in incidents targeting foreign nationals, with more than double the number of foreign victims kidnapped in the region over the previous reporting period. November-December also accounted for the highest figure recorded over any period in 2020. This drastic jump was mainly attributed to a series of mass abductions of Latin-American migrants in the US. This is indicative of a series of changes in the criminal landscape at the US-Mexico border. While according to the Mexican authorities there were approximately 54% fewer recorded cases of illegal migration into Mexico between January and November 2020 than the same period in 2019, victimisation of these people appears to have increased in the COVID-19 era. This trend had already begun in mid-2019, brought about by a tightening of US migration policies. Known as 'Remain in Mexico', this policy has left thousands of asylum seekers stranded in some of the most dangerous cities in Mexico, at the mercy of a plethora of criminal and armed groups present along the shared border. The increasing number of cases north of the border can be attributed to the concurrent expansion of Mexican transnational criminal organisations (TCOs) in the US. Through forging partnerships with local street gangs, prison gangs, and other transnational gangs with a local presence, these groups have managed to create a series of distribution hubs across the country. According to a DEA report, at least 15 of the biggest American cities have a significant cartel presence, including Houston, Atlanta, Phoenix, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Detroit. In addition to the targeting of migrants for kidnap on both sides of the border, an increase in kidnaps linked to criminal disputes among suspected members of these groups was also observed over 2020.

### CASES:

- ▶ On 3 December, Houston police discovered and rescued 26 people who had been held by a human smuggling gang. Police said they were alerted to the scene after a man was seen running down a street yelling that he had been kidnapped. When officers arrived, the man took them to the location where the others were being held hostage. When questioned, the victims said they had been kept there for up to a week. Investigators said that the victims had been taken from Brownsville, Texas, on the border with Mexico. The rescued individuals came from Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Cuba. A number of suspects were arrested at the location.
- ▶ A Canadian man and his Mexican wife were found safe in a hotel in Mexico's Puebla state after having fallen victim to a virtual kidnapping in Jalisco state by individuals who initially identified themselves as police officers and later as cartel members. The pair had travelled to at least eight cities in five states



Houston police discovered a property where a number of Latin American migrants were being held. (Photo: Houston Chronicle)

before being found. While in "captivity", the victims were forced to transfer MXP 200,000 (approximately USD 10,000) to the criminals. After that, the callers claimed they had also kidnapped the woman's brother, and demanded more money to release him. Meanwhile, they contacted their victims' relatives and demanded a ransom of MXP 500,000 (nearly USD 25,000) in exchange for the couple's release.

The woman's brother, who acted as the family's spokesperson, was also instructed to check-in at different hotels in Jalisco and Guanajuato. After the events were reported to the authorities, the police were able to locate the three victims. No arrests have so far been made.

Now several years old, the Venezuelan crisis is far from resolution. An opposition at its weakest, ongoing economic international sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic continue to promote the breakdown of Venezuela's social and economic fabric, with approximately 60% of Venezuelans thought to be living in poverty. Among other long-standing structural issues, political patronage is behind the rapid growth of organised crime in Venezuela, which is now being exported to other countries in the region. However, recent large-scale clashes between the security forces and these groups may indicate the increasing disjointedness of their interests and consequent rupture of previous arrangements, as criminal gangs gain more autonomy. While a large number of wealthy individuals and foreign nationals previously residing in the country have emigrated in response to the deteriorating situation, those remaining continue to be targeted in kidnaps for ransom. A similar situation prevails in Haiti, where kidnapping for ransom keeps growing in frequency and scope. While the great majority of victims are local nationals, the abduction of foreign citizens – particularly those of Haitian origin – continue to be reported in the local media.

### CASES:

- ▶ The Bolivarian National Guard detained two suspects in the kidnap and murder of Spanish businesswoman María del Carmen Nogueira de Vásquez in Caracas. She was last seen leaving her house in the Venezuelan capital in her van, on 19 December. Her relatives then lost contact with her. The police arrested the suspects in Libertador municipality, on the outskirts of Caracas, after they had a traffic accident while driving the victim's van. According to initial investigations, the men had the accident after dumping the victim's body in the Guaire River. The elderly woman was reportedly murdered after the kidnappers were not able to contact her relatives to demand a ransom.
- ▶ The National Police of Peru (PNP) captured two Venezuelan criminals who had kidnapped a young woman as she was leaving a shopping centre in the city of Callao. The criminals reportedly threatened the victim with a firearm and took her away in a moto-taxi in front of several passers-by, who informed the police. The police soon located the criminals, who finding themselves cornered, abandoned the victim. The kidnappers were later arrested. Initial investigations determined that the suspects were members of the 'Los Chamos de Valdivieso' gang.

- ▶ Elie Henry, a religious leader from the US, was kidnapped in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, along with his daughter, Irma Henry, on 24 December, said a statement from the Miami-based Inter-American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist church. According to the local press, the kidnappers demanded a USD 5 million ransom for the release of the victims. It is reported that Elie, who is a native of Haiti, was in the country on a short trip with his wife to visit Irma and her brother, who live in the country. The hostages were released after four days in captivity, allegedly following the payment of a ransom.



Shootout between elements of the Venezuelan security forces and gang members in Caracas' Cota 905 in September 2020. (Photo: El Universal)



# EUROPE

Over the reporting period, Europe experienced a decrease in the number of abducted foreign nationals, from 10 in September-October to only three over the last two months of 2020. However, a series of cases involving local nationals was recorded over the reporting period, many of which were connected to other criminal activities, such as drug dealing and trafficking. According to Europol, the COVID-19 crisis has had a significant and potentially long-lasting impact on the security landscape in Europe. While initially adversely affected by the pandemic, organised crime groups soon adapted and sought to exploit it. Economic hardship has led to increasing recruitment, while the decreased ability of law enforcement authorities to counter security threats – due to their focus on health directives and resulting civil unrest – has provided a fertile ground for criminal activity. This in turn has led to increasing violence in the region, as competing groups vie for control of territory and as a result of the impact on traditional activities, such as drug and people trafficking. In this context of adaptation, cyber crime, fraud and health-themed crime have seen an exponential increase over 2020. While some of these new criminal trends are expected to eventually subside as the pandemic comes under control, others may prove harder to reverse.

## CASES:

- ▶ Agents of the Spanish National Police arrested four Italian and Colombian nationals in Alicante, accused of kidnapping, drug trafficking and assault. During the arrest, one of the suspects, an Italian, told the agents he had been held hostage and tortured by the other three for several hours. The Italian national said the men had demanded EUR 3,000 euros from his family, threatening to kill him if this was not paid. Initial investigations revealed that the man was kidnapped because he had tried to defraud the other three, paying for a consignment of narcotics with counterfeit money.
- ▶ On 12 November, a man in Côte-d'Or, France, was kidnapped by criminals who later demanded a ransom of EUR 7,000 for his release. The authorities, in coordination with the victim's relatives, set up an entrapment operation. The men were arrested in the locality of Arc-sur-Tille when they arrived to collect the money. The victim, whose kidnapping was believed to be linked to drug trafficking operations, was rescued at the scene. Following his rescue, searches took place in Chevigny-Saint-Sauveur and Saint-Apollinaire. More than EUR 20,000 in cash, weapons, balaclavas and dozens of cell phones were discovered and seized.

- ▶ On 5 November, the Italian security services arrested five Moroccans for the physical assault and kidnap of two compatriots in Reggio Emilia. According to official reports, the couple was attacked with bladed weapons by four men on motorcycles on 2 November. After the ambush, the woman was kidnapped, assaulted and later dumped in a desolate area. The Italian police said that evidence suggests the incident could have been a criminal settling of scores, as the attack seemed to be premeditated, with the attackers tracking the couple's movements for some time.



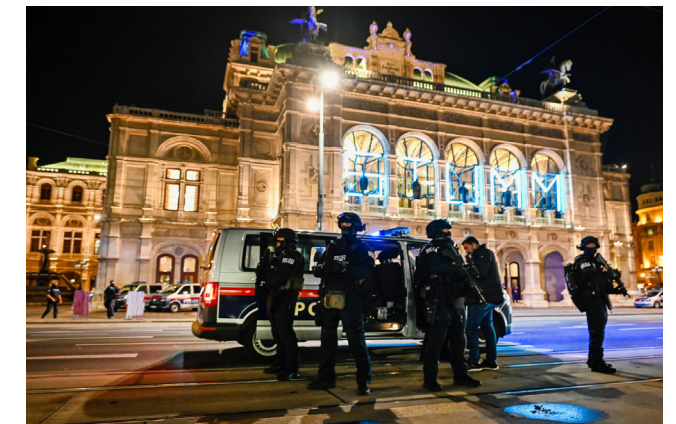
French gendarmerie in Côte-d'Or rescue the victim of a kidnap linked to drug trafficking on 13 November 2020. (Photo: Le Bien Publique)

While Europol has assessed that the short-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the terrorist threat in Europe over 2020 was very limited, it is expected that the real implications will be felt in the long-term. For instance, the pandemic has resulted in a rise in the radicalisation of individuals. This has been brought about by two dynamics. One has been the upsurge in propaganda published by extremist groups with a correlated increase in the levels of consumption of this content by susceptible persons due to their increased time online as a result of stay-at-home measures. The other is the social dissatisfaction created by the pandemic, linked to government responses and the resultant economic crisis, which is one of the main drivers for radicalisation. This has been observed in all types of ideology, including jihadism, far-right extremism and anti-government activism. Moreover, increasing polarisation has been observed in recent months with the online scene acting as an echo chamber, mirroring and endorsing the beliefs of radicalised or radical-prone individuals, amplifying these sentiments and biases. All this could lead to spontaneous/reactive attacks in the shorter term, and the possible future materialisation of more sophisticated assaults if left to develop. While attacks carried out by extremists in Europe so far have typically been unsophisticated in nature, utilising rudimentary weapons such as knives and cars, the future use of other tactics such as kidnapping with political/ideological motivations cannot be ruled out.

## CASES:

- ▶ The Russian National Antiterrorism Committee said in a statement on 5 December that Russian law enforcement and intelligence agencies had thwarted over 40 terrorist attacks in Russia in 2020. As many as 49 militants, including eight ringleaders, were killed during counter-terrorism operations, while another 36 ringleaders, 162 militants and 591 accomplices were detained. Additionally, 600 firearms, 134 homemade explosive devices, over 100,000 cartridges and more than 3,000 mines, grenades and other munitions were seized during anti-terrorism operations, with at least 50 clandestine arms workshops having also been dismantled. The Committee said that throughout the year additional measures were taken to ensure the safety of crucial energy and transport facilities. The affiliations of targeted terrorists and dismantled plots were not revealed.
- ▶ Meanwhile, kidnaps linked to the various sub-regional crises continued to be reported. For instance, on 4 December, the Russian Secret Service engaged in an exchange of fire in Belgorod and Voronezh, at the border between Russia and Ukraine, with three armed men who tried to cross illegally. This incursion was said to be part of an operation of the Ukrainian Special Forces aimed at capturing one of the 33 Russian mercenaries who had been arrested in Belarus in late July 2020. The

target had already been captured and sedated, and the group was about to transport him to Ukraine when the shootout took place. The victim was rescued unharmed.



Armed police stand outside the Vienna State Opera following a terrorist attack on 3 November 2020. (Photo: The Guardian)



# MIDDLE EAST

Over last two months of 2020, the Middle East experienced kidnapping levels consistent with the previous reporting period, once again accounting for 12% of the total number of foreign victims. Over 40% of victims recorded in the region were taken in Iran. This was however linked to the November seizure of a vessel and arrest of its 10-man crew, who were accused by the Iranian authorities of smuggling oil. This type of incident is not uncommon and follows a series of violent events involving shipping in and around the Persian Gulf as tension between Iran and the West (particularly the US) and their Gulf allies continues. A spike in hostility has been observed in recent weeks, corresponding to the first anniversary of the killing of the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Qasem Soleimani, by US forces, with Iran engaging in public displays of aggression, both in its discourse and military action. These moves could undermine planned efforts by US President-elect Joe Biden to rejoin the nuclear deal with Iran, which could potentially see the easing of sanctions against the country. It is likely that the Islamic Republic will continue to resort to unconventional tactics in the short to medium term, including illegal detentions of foreign nationals and dual citizens, looking to gain leverage in future re-negotiations with international parties. Iran will also continue to enforce its stand with the use of proxy groups in the region (and further afield), thereby contributing to the prolonging of regional conflicts and insecurity.

## CASES:

- ▶ On 4 January, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) seized the South Korean-flagged tanker HANKUK CHEMI in waters off Oman and detained its 20 crew, including nationals of South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar. The vessel, which is currently being held at Iran's Bandar Abbas port, is accused of polluting the Gulf with chemicals. The vessel's South Korean operator, DM Shipping, has denied that the ship violated any environmental protocols. The incident occurred ahead of the visit of South Korea's deputy foreign minister to Tehran against the background of tension between the two countries over USD 7 billion in Iranian oil funds currently frozen in South Korean banks due to US sanctions. In response, the South Korean government dispatched military resources to the Strait of Hormuz, comprising a 300-strong force, a helicopter, and a 400-ton destroyer, though it is unclear what actions they may be authorised to take. Additionally, it is reported that South Korea has requested the assistance of Qatar to secure the release of the tanker and its crew.
- ▶ 14 Indians, seven Bangladeshis and a number of Egyptians were released in Yemen by Houthi rebels on 28 November thanks to diplomatic efforts by their respective governments and the mediation of the

International Organisation for Migration (IOM). With the exception of two Bangladeshis, all the released were detained crew members of a vessel that capsized near Al Salaif Port in Hodeida on 10 February 2020 while on its way to Saudi Arabia from Oman. The circumstances of the arrest of the other two Bangladeshis were not ascertained.



Members of Shia militia group Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba march during a parade marking al-Quds Day in Baghdad, Iraq. (Photo: Al Monitor)

In Iraq, attacks against US-linked assets and personnel by rogue Shia militias officially resumed as of 9 December. This followed a statement in which they announced they would no longer abide by the ceasefire called by the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs) on 12 October, which would enable negotiations with the incoming Biden administration. As a result, at least 12 attacks were recorded nationwide against US-linked assets over December alone. An uptick in hostile activity, including anti-US/Western rhetoric, was particularly noted surrounding the first anniversary of the killing of the Deputy head of the PMU, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, and Iranian General Soleimani. This included reports that the IRGC has been transferring short-range missiles and drones into Iraq. In response, the US Embassy withdrew half of its diplomatic staff from Baghdad and US President Donald Trump threatened retaliatory action in the event of any future attacks killing US citizens. While still likely to enjoy the backing of well-established PMUs, and indirectly of Iran, these rogue factions have demonstrated a level of autonomy that is of increasing concern. US diplomatic and military facilities, as well as Coalition-linked convoys, are likely to remain the focus of attacks by non-aligned Shia militias. However, incidents targeting foreign commercial operations cannot be discounted. Additionally, while no kidnaps have so far been officially claimed by these groups, future occurrences targeting foreign nationals remain a possibility, particularly as this has been a tactic previously used by their PMU counterparts.

## CASES:

- ▶ International programmes in Iraq, particularly in the west of the country, are also threatened by the Islamic State (IS). For example, on 3 November, IS claimed the murder of an Iraqi engineer it had kidnapped a week earlier in Anbar province. The terror group publicised the act by posting an image of his execution on its Telegram channel. IS said the engineer was killed as he was a leader of a local PMU who had fought against them. The victim's body has not yet been found. Amer Jadaan Al-Fahdawi was kidnapped on 25 October at a fake checkpoint west of Ramadi on the International Highway by IS militants disguised as security officials. Fahdawi was supervising the reconstruction of a bridge near Rutba at the time of the event. Media articles claimed that Al-Fahdawi was employed by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). This was not confirmed by UNDP officials.
- ▶ On 30 November, IS released two Iraqis it had abducted over half a year ago from their farm in Daquq district, Kirkuk governorate. The men were allegedly freed after their families paid a ransom of USD 40,000, out of the USD 50,000 originally demanded. The men said they were tortured and constantly threatened with death while in captivity.
- ▶ The Bekaa Valley remains Lebanon's kidnap for ransom hub, with a series of incidents targeting

businessmen and foreign nationals recorded over the reporting period. On 23 December, the Lebanese army carried out a raid in the town of Brital, intending to rescue a kidnapped businessman. During the operation, a number of Syrian nationals were arrested, but the victim was not found. Adnane Dabaja was abducted on 17 November near the site of a tourism project he was leading in the western Bekaa Valley. Reportedly, the kidnapers have demanded USD 3 million to free the businessman. This is the second time Dabaja has been kidnapped. Previously, in 2016, he was abducted along with his brother after a financial dispute. On that occasion he was rescued by the security forces.



Masked gunmen from the Meqdad clan in the southern suburbs of Beirut, Lebanon. (Photo: The Atlantic)



# AFRICA

Though Africa experienced a decrease of 23% in the number of kidnapped foreign nationals over the reporting period, the region retained its ranking as the top hotspot for this activity, accounting for nearly 50% of victims recorded by Constellis globally. Once again, most of the victims were in Nigeria and Libya, which combined accounted for almost 70% of the region's figures. Over the last two months of 2020 and beginning of 2021, the situation in Libya has shown some signs of improvement, following the 23 October ceasefire agreement between the two main warring parties – General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) and the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), led by Fayez al-Sarraj. However, despite fighting notably decreasing since then, the implementation of measures towards a full cessation of hostilities are experiencing significant delays, including the withdrawal of troops from frontlines. Whether due to operational issues or deliberately, this brings into question the parties' real commitment to a full ceasefire and subsequent peace agreement. In the same vein, the most recent UN-brokered talks in November, as well as their results – including the designation of an interim government – have been engulfed by controversy. While elections have been called for the end of 2021, it is yet to be seen if the current ceasefire will hold or new outbreaks of violence occur, leading to a resumption of the conflict. Meanwhile, it is reported that lawlessness endures on the ground, disrupting the daily life of Libya's residents, who continue to be affected by rampant criminality, including kidnapping for ransom. In Nigeria, the government is under increasing pressure to deliver meaningful results as 2020 was assessed to be one of the worse years for the country in terms of security. Nigeria is currently confronted with a series of threats: a jihadi front in the north that seems to be expanding its presence beyond its traditional strongholds in the country's northeast, increasing violence carried out by so-called 'bandits' in the central belt and a nascent oil militancy that has been linked to the worsening of piracy in the country's waters and those of its neighbours. All of these issues having a direct impact on the kidnapping situation in the country, which appears to be spiralling out of control.

## CASES:

- ▶ In Libya, criminal investigators in Benghazi arrested a Libyan and an Egyptian for their involvement in the kidnapping for ransom of an Egyptian citizen. According to reports, after the abduction, the perpetrators took the victim to a garage in the Bouatni area and later transferred him to another garage in Sidi Akhribish. The suspects then reportedly demanded a ransom of LYD 41,000 (USD 30,000) from the victim's brother, who lives in Saudi Arabia. The brother reported the incident to the Libyan authorities, who rescued the hostage two days after his abduction. The rescue took place following the arrest of the perpetrators as they went to a money transfer office to collect the ransom.
- ▶ On 27 November, armed Nigerian kidnappers shot dead a policeman and abducted a Chinese expatriate in Ekiti state. Another expatriate is reported to have sustained gunshot wounds. The Chinese nationals are employees of a construction firm carrying out a road project in Ado-Ekiti. The kidnapped engineer was released on 1

December. According to the Nigerian authorities, he was freed as a result of a security operation launched by the police, denying that any ransom payment took place. However, a source within the construction company employing the victim said that the abductee was released after the payment of a NGN 100 million (over USD 260,000) ransom, which was collected in Kwara state.



Demonstrators demanding an end to kidnapping and banditry in Nigeria during a protest in Katsina on 17 December 2020. (Photo: The Africa Report)

In the Sahel, the security crisis continues to worsen, with 2020 having been the deadliest year since 2012, when the conflict began. In addition to an escalation of intercommunal violence, jihadists have enlarged their territorial control, claiming large swathes of Mali, Burkina Faso and progressively increasing their presence in Niger. Though counter-terrorism operations by France and its allies intensified throughout the year, jihadist groups in the region have proven resilient, overcoming significant setbacks such as the killing of some of their top leaders. The prospects of the situation ameliorating over 2021 are poor, particularly as budgetary constraints, already voiced in pre-Corona times, will have a significant impact on the fight against terrorism in the Sahel. This will be confronted with the increasing focus given to the region by transnational jihadi groups. Also of concern are developments in Mozambique, where there are mounting indications that militant groups in the northern Cabo Delgado province are becoming stronger, enjoying growing support from the Islamic State (IS) proper. Not only has a growing alignment in terms of Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs) been observed, but they are also growing bolder and more ambitious, arguably as a result of material support from the IS central command. As a result, the French oil company Total announced on 1 January 2021 that it had reduced operations and the number of workers in the natural gas project in Mozambique's Afungi region, due to terrorist attacks near the facilities. At present, these groups' kidnapping operations have been largely limited to the intimidation of locals in rural areas. However, an evolution towards the targeting of individuals linked to international projects in the area cannot be discarded, particularly in view of IS tactics being increasingly adopted, and evidenced by past attacks on international convoys. Meanwhile, kidnaps of businesspeople and foreign nationals continue to be recorded in urban Mozambique. Though these incidents have decreased in recent months, likely linked to a series of recent arrests forcing kidnapping syndicates to lay low, the threat endures.

## CASES:

- ▶ In late December, the Algerian Ministry of Defence announced the recovery of EUR 80,000, believed to be part of the first instalment of the ransom paid to Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) for the release of four high-profile hostages in October, during a raid carried out in Jijel province, where militants regularly operate. The discovery was reportedly made in part thanks to information obtained following the capture on 16 December of militant Rezkane Ahcene, who was one of the 200 jihadists freed as part of the deal for the release of the said hostages. It is believed that a total ransom as high as EUR 30 million may have been paid to JNIM. The exchange fuelled tensions between Paris and Algiers, with the latter strongly criticising the "questionable practices" that enable militant groups in the region to operate.
- ▶ An unknown group abducted the daughter of the owner a restaurant in Maputo province on 9 November. The Portuguese victim, Jessica Pequeno, was abducted outside her residence in the city of Matola as she was on her way to drop her baby off at her nursery early in the morning. The hostage was released after four days in captivity. According to local media, the Pequeno

family paid a ransom of MZN 4 million (approximately USD 54,000) for Jessica's release. It is reported that the victim was well treated throughout her captivity, and given medication for her medical condition. The fact that her captors had knowledge of her health condition and of her routine have led the authorities to believe that people known to the woman and her family could have been implicated in the kidnapping. Particular attention is reportedly being paid to employees (former and current) of the restaurant owned by her family. This is the first instance in the country that a woman has been targeted in a high-profile kidnapping.



Footage of JNIM leader Iyad Ag Ghaly celebrating the release of over 200 terrorists. (Photo: Menas Associates)



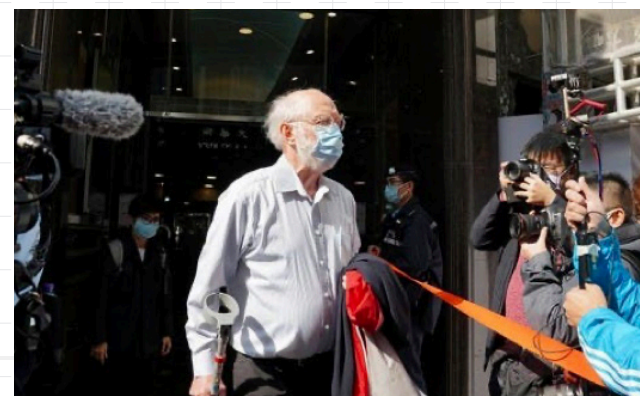
# ASIA

Asia also saw a reduction in the number of kidnapped foreign nationals in November-December 2020. This decrease of almost 50% can be attributed to the second wave of the Coronavirus infection, which triggered the reinforcement of social distancing measures, including lockdowns in certain cases. Despite these measures, abductions targeting individuals linked to the Chinese offshore gambling industry continued. This trend has been particularly conspicuous in the Philippines, where according to the Philippine National Police, the number of kidnapping cases involving Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs) almost doubled in 2020. The Philippine authorities believe that the increase was due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in a loss of profit for many operators, who have resorted to kidnap for ransom to substitute this income. A nascent trend observed since the start of 2021 has been abductions between members of different POGOs and the targeting of staff of this industry by Chinese kidnapping gangs. Meanwhile, China has continued to clamp down on online gambling, which has been made illegal due to the threat it allegedly poses to China's security and economy. According to a recent report published by the Chinese authorities, in 2020 a total of 7,500 individuals were arrested in China for participating in or facilitating gambling activities online or offshore, in addition to 600 Chinese nationals who were arrested abroad, mainly in Malaysia, the Philippines, Myanmar and Vietnam. China has also intensified its crackdown on dissidents, particularly in Hong Kong, where the National Security Law (NSL) imposed in June has been increasingly used to this end. The recent arrest of an American national under this law has not only renewed warnings of the threat of politically-motivated arrests but also renewed tension between China and the West.

## CASES:

- ▶ On 9 January, Philippine police in Metro Manila arrested eight members of a Chinese kidnap for ransom gang targeting Chinese nationals working in the Philippine online gaming industry. The operation was launched after a Chinese man was killed in December despite his family having paid a ransom of CNY 400,000 (approximately USD 62,000) to the kidnapers. The deceased was one of two employees of a Chinese-owned online gambling firm kidnapped on 23 December. The other victim was also shot and left for dead but survived his injuries, later being able to report the incident to the police.
- ▶ John Clancey, a partner at a Chinese law firm, was arrested on 6 January by Hong Kong police during a raid on the firm's offices in the city's business district. The American human rights lawyer was arrested along with 55 pro-democracy activists for alleged subversion under the terms of Hong Kong's National Security Law (NSL). The individuals were arrested as they were members of a group that held unofficial non-binding primary elections in July 2020 to choose candidates for upcoming legislative elections. The American lawyer

had reportedly acted as the treasurer of the said group. Clancey is the first foreign national detained under the NSL. The group was later bailed, but it is reported that if they are charged and convicted, they could face up to life in prison. Following this incident, the US on 15 January imposed sanctions against six Chinese officials, including Hong Kong's sole representative to China's National People's Congress.



American lawyer John Clancey walks out of his office building as he is taken away by police in Hong Kong, on 6 January 2021. (Photo: Reuters)

Afghanistan's prospects appear tenuous in view of the January reduction of US troops, in accordance with President Trump's November 2020 directive. This decrease, from 4,500 to 2,500, has brought American military presence in the country to its lowest level since their arrival in 2001. While the Taliban have welcomed the move, describing it as an important step toward the implementation of the Doha agreement of February last year, opposing feelings have been expressed by leaders within the Afghan government. One of these voices has been Afghanistan's vice president, Amrullah Saleh, who said that the pullout risks more violence and instability in the country. Indeed, violence has escalated in recent months despite peace talks being underway. The US Embassy in Afghanistan issued a security alert on 17 January 2021, warning of the increase in terrorist attacks, kidnappings, criminal violence, and civil unrest throughout the country. While it could be argued that this has been a Taliban strategy to gain the upper hand in the negotiations, there is also concern over the level of effective control the Taliban delegation in Doha exercises over their local units, who may have differing interests and views altogether. As is the case with many conflicts around the world, President Biden's foreign policy could have a decisive impact on the Afghan conflict.

## CASES:

- ▶ On 28 November, an employee of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was kidnapped by unknown individuals in Afghanistan's Maidan Wardak on his way back from visiting family in Kabul. After establishing contact with the ICRC delegation, the victim was reportedly allowed to continue with his trip. The incident took place in the same area where suspected Taliban militants abducted 28 civilians two days earlier.
- ▶ Afghan security forces rescued a 16-year-old boy and arrested five kidnapers during an operation in Surkhrod district, Nangarhar province, on 17 December. The criminals, who had abducted the minor on his way to school the previous week, initially demanded a ransom of USD 300,000 for his release. They later demanded an additional USD 100,000 from the family after the first payment was made.
- ▶ In India, a number of abductions have been carried out by insurgents in the north of the country in recent weeks. On 21 December, two oil workers were kidnapped by armed men in Arunachal Pradesh. The two men, employed by Quippo Oil and Gas Infrastructure, were abducted from a drilling site in Changlang district by approximately 14 armed assailants who took them towards the Manabhum reserve forest. According to eyewitnesses, the suspected militants had initially come looking for

another person, who they had been extorting for a large amount of money. The kidnap was later claimed by the United Liberation Front of Asom - Independent (ULFA-I), who threatened to attack oil installations in the state if the IRN 200 million (USD 2.7 million) demanded as ransom was not paid. The rebel group released a hostage video on 20 January, threatening to kill one of the victims, who is not an Arunachal Pradesh local, if the company continued to delay the payment. Following the threats made by the ULFA-I, and despite assurances from both the company and the local authorities, over 60 employees of Quippo Oil evacuated the Innao drilling site, bringing company activities at the site to a standstill.

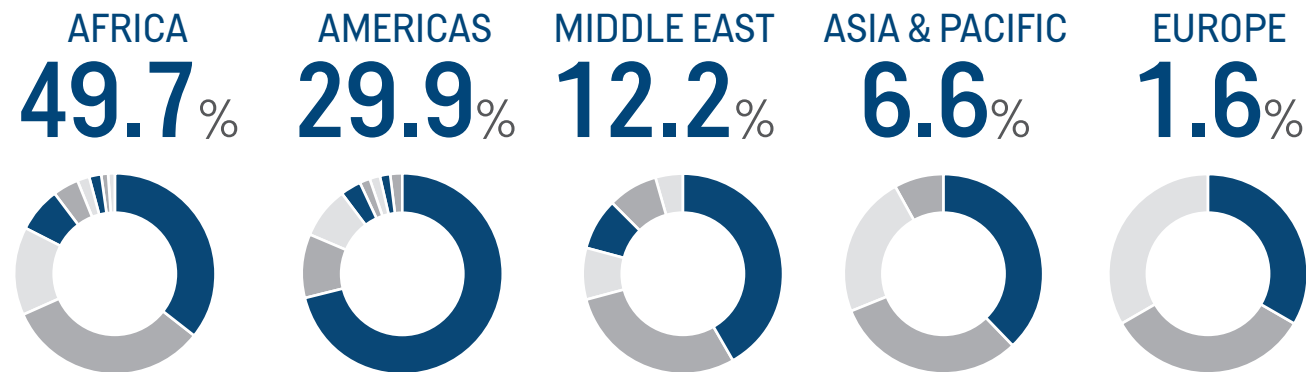
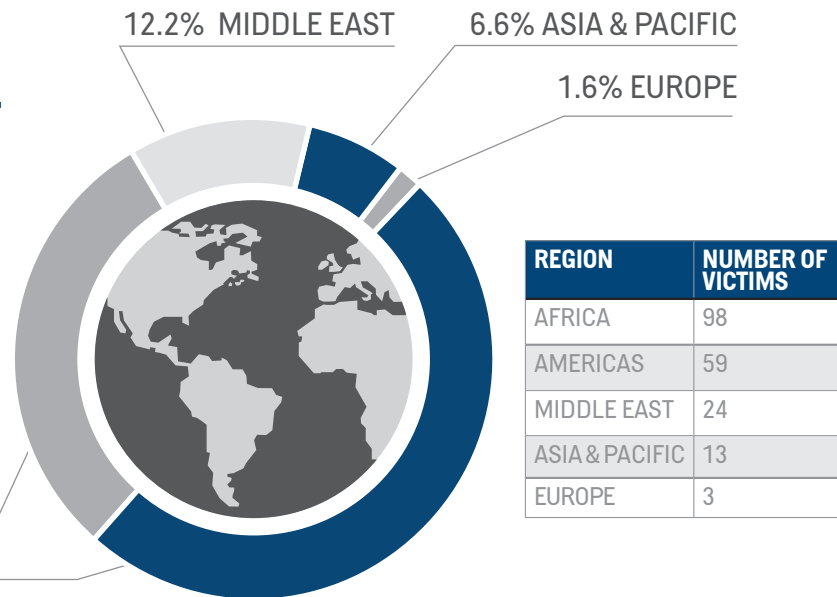


Kabul deputy governor killed in the explosion of a bomb attached to his car on 15 December. (Photo: Reuters)

## KIDNAPPED FOREIGN CITIZENS

### Global AND Regional GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF VICTIMS

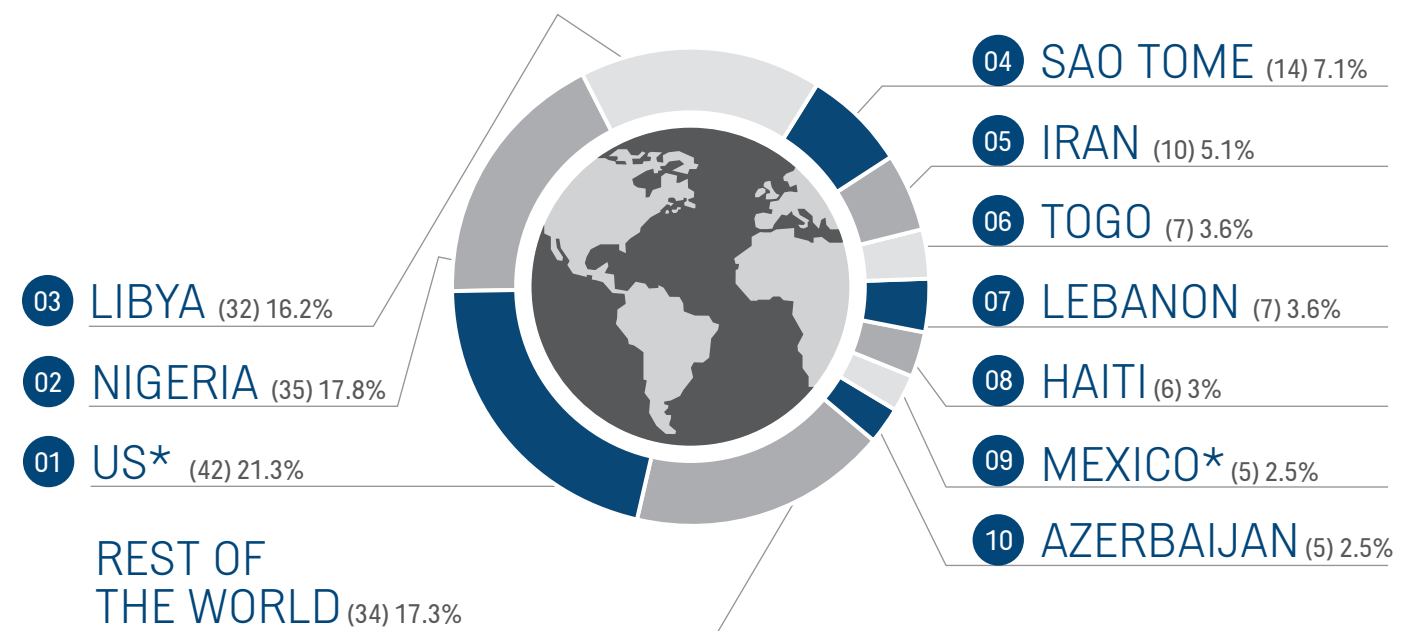
Statistics for November-December 2020 are drawn from Constellis' record of 197 kidnapped foreign nationals. Over September-October 2020, Constellis recorded a total of 223 foreigners kidnapped across the world.



Nigeria (35) ..... 35.7%	US* (42) ..... 71.2%	Iran (10)..... 41.7%	Azerbaijan (5)..... 38%	Spain (1)..... 33.33%
Libya (32) ..... 32.7%	Haiti (6)..... 10.2%	Lebanon (7)..... 29.2%	Philippines (4)..... 31%	Italy (1) ..... 33.33%
Sao Tome (14)..... 14.3%	Mexico * (5) ..... 8.5%	Kuwait (2)..... 8.3%	India (3) ..... 23%	Malta (1)..... 33.33%
Togo (7) ..... 7.2%	Venezuela (2)..... 3.3%	Syria* (2)..... 8.3%	Thailand (1)..... 8%	
Mozambique (4)..... 4.1%	Colombia (1) ..... 1.7%	Bahrain (2) ..... 8.3%		
SA (2)..... 2%	Ecuador (1)..... 1.7%	Turkey (1) ..... 4.2%		
Tanzania (2)..... 2%	Paraguay (1)..... 1.7%			
Ivory Coast (1)..... 1%	Peru (1) ..... 1.7%			
Mali (1) ..... 1%				

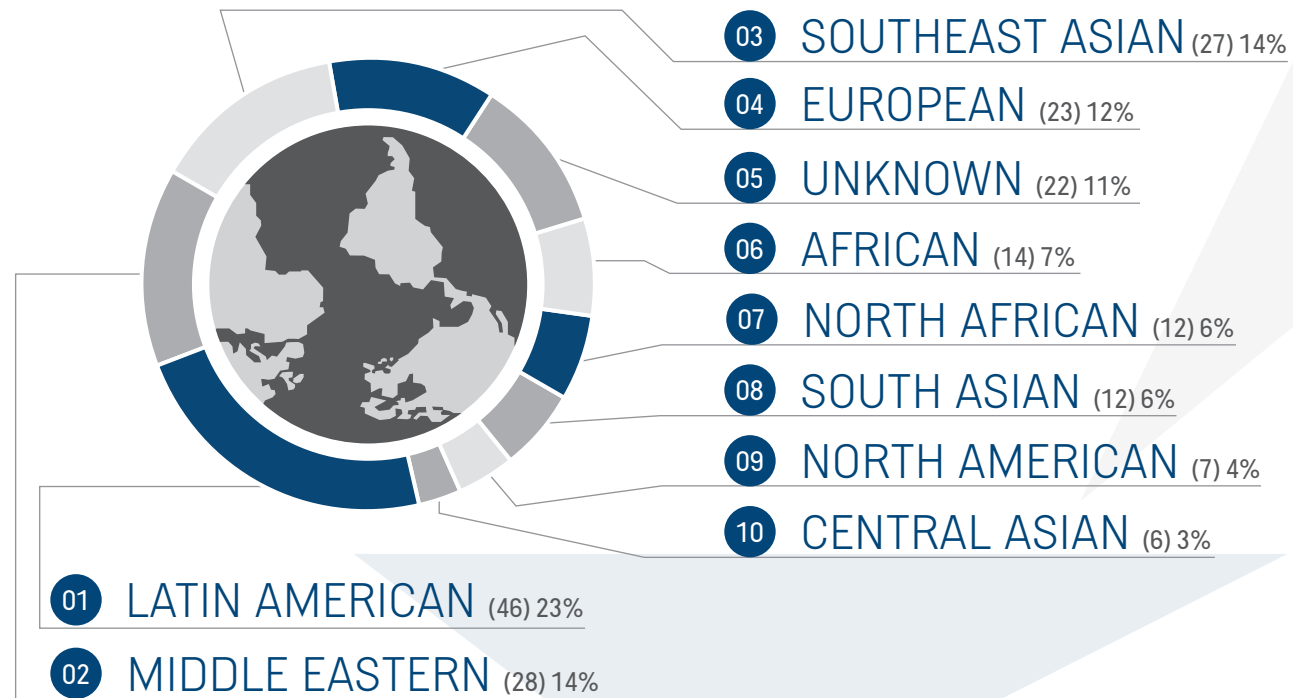
SA = South Africa (Number of Victims)  
\* Including Migrants

## TOP 10 COUNTRIES FOR THE KIDNAPPING OF FOREIGN CITIZENS IN NOV-DEC 2020





## REGIONAL ORIGINS OF VICTIMS



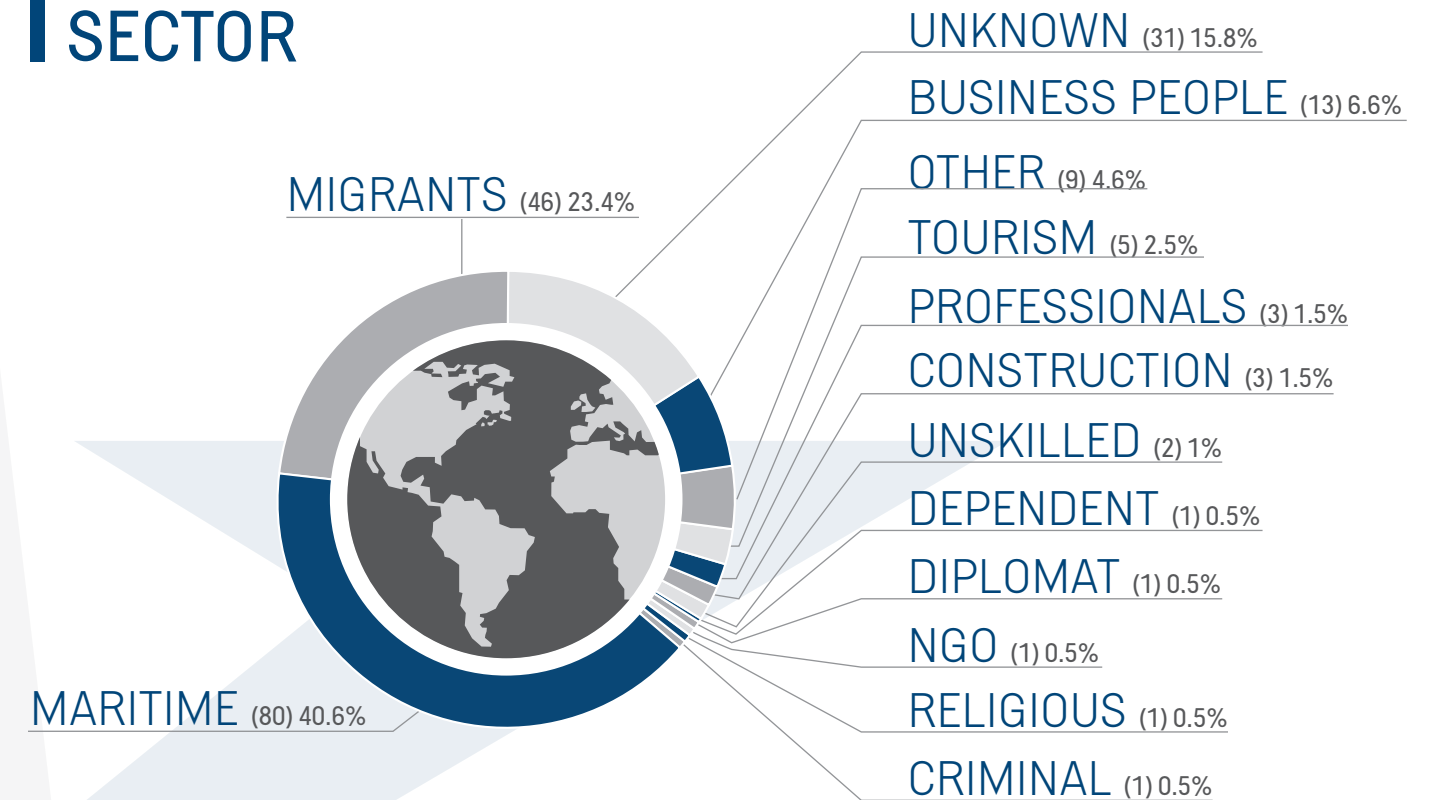
## MOST VICTIMIZED SINGLE NATIONALITY

- 01 Chinese
- 02 Egyptian
- 03 Indian
- 04 Turkish
- 05 Ukrainian
- 06 Lebanese
- 07 Syrian
- 08 Ghanaian
- 09 Armenian
- 10 Canadian

## MOST VICTIMIZED ORIGIN BY REGION

REGION	ORIGIN
Africa	Southeast Asian
Americas	Latin American
Asia & Pacific	Southeast Asian
Europe	European
Middle East	Middle Eastern

## VICTIMS BY SECTOR



## MOST VICTIMIZED SECTOR BY REGION

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

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.

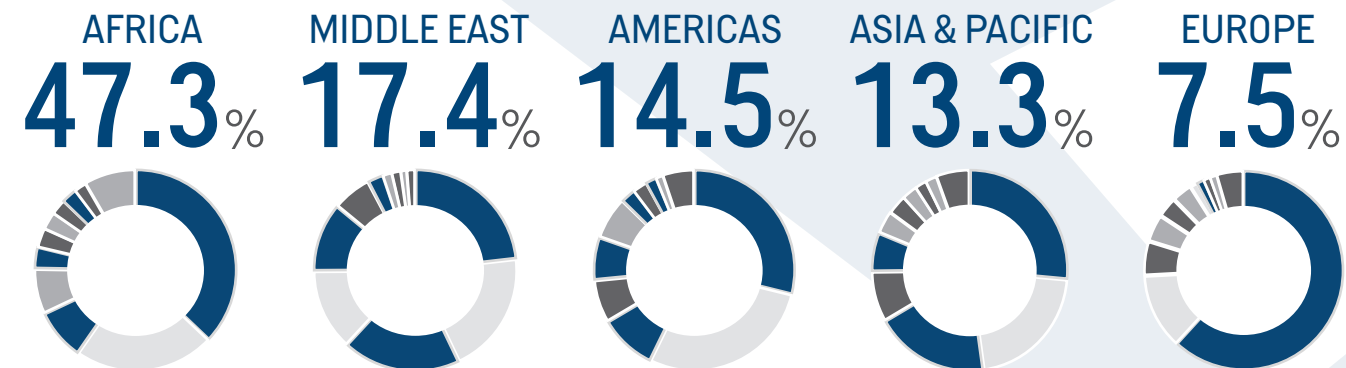
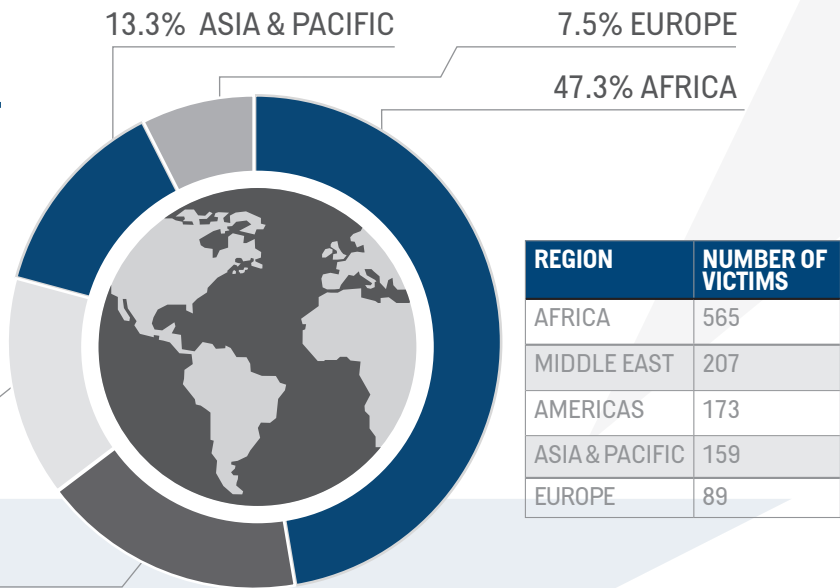


# STATISTICS 2020

## KIDNAPPED FOREIGN CITIZENS

### Global AND Regional GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF VICTIMS

Statistics for 2020 are drawn from Constellis' record of 1,193 foreign nationals kidnapped worldwide. In 2019, Constellis registered a total of 1,569 foreigners kidnapped across the world.



Libya* (210) ..... 37.1%	Iran (48)..... 23.2%	Mexico* (50)..... 28.9%	Philippines (42).... 26.4%	Belarus (55)..... 61.8%
Nigeria (128)..... 22.6%	Lebanon* (41)..... 19.8%	US* (49) ..... 28.4%	Pakistan* (34)..... 21.3%	Spain (11)..... 12.4%
Benin (47) ..... 8.3%	UAE (39) ..... 18.9%	Colombia (16) ..... 9.3%	Cambodia* (30) ... 18.9%	Russia (5) ..... 5.6%
Ghana* (41) ..... 7.3%	Syria* (27)..... 13.1%	Haiti (12) ..... 6.9%	Malaysia* (13) ..... 8.2%	Cyprus* (4)..... 4.5%
Guinea (20) ..... 3.5%	Yemen (23)..... 11.1%	Venezuela (12) ..... 6.9%	India* (10)..... 6.3%	Ireland (3)..... 3.4%
Tanzania* (17) ..... 3.1%	Iraq (13)..... 6.3%	Trinidad	Papua	Ukraine* (3) ..... 3.4%
Gabon (16) ..... 2.8%	Turkey (5) ..... 2.4%	& Tobago* (12) ..... 6.9%	New Guinea (6) ..... 3.8%	Lithuania (1)..... 1.1%
Mozambique (14)... 2.5%	Kuwait (3)..... 1.4%	Ecuador (4)..... 2.3%	Azerbaijan (5)..... 3.1%	Sweden (1)..... 1.1%
Sao Tome (14) ..... 2.5%	Saudi Arabia (3) ..... 1.4%	Uruguay* (4) ..... 2.3%	China (4)..... 2.5%	Belgium (1) ..... 1.1%
South Africa (11).... 1.9%	Qatar (2) ..... 1%	Paraguay (3)..... 1.7%	Afghanistan (3) ..... 1.9%	Greece (1) ..... 1.1%
Others* (47) ..... 8.4%	Others (3) ..... 1.4%	Brazil* (2)..... 1.2%	Thailand (3) ..... 1.9%	Others (4) ..... 4.5%
		Others (9) ..... 5.2%	Others (9) ..... 5.7%	

(Number of Victims)  
\* Including Migrants

## TOP 10 COUNTRIES FOR THE KIDNAPPING OF FOREIGN CITIZENS IN 2020

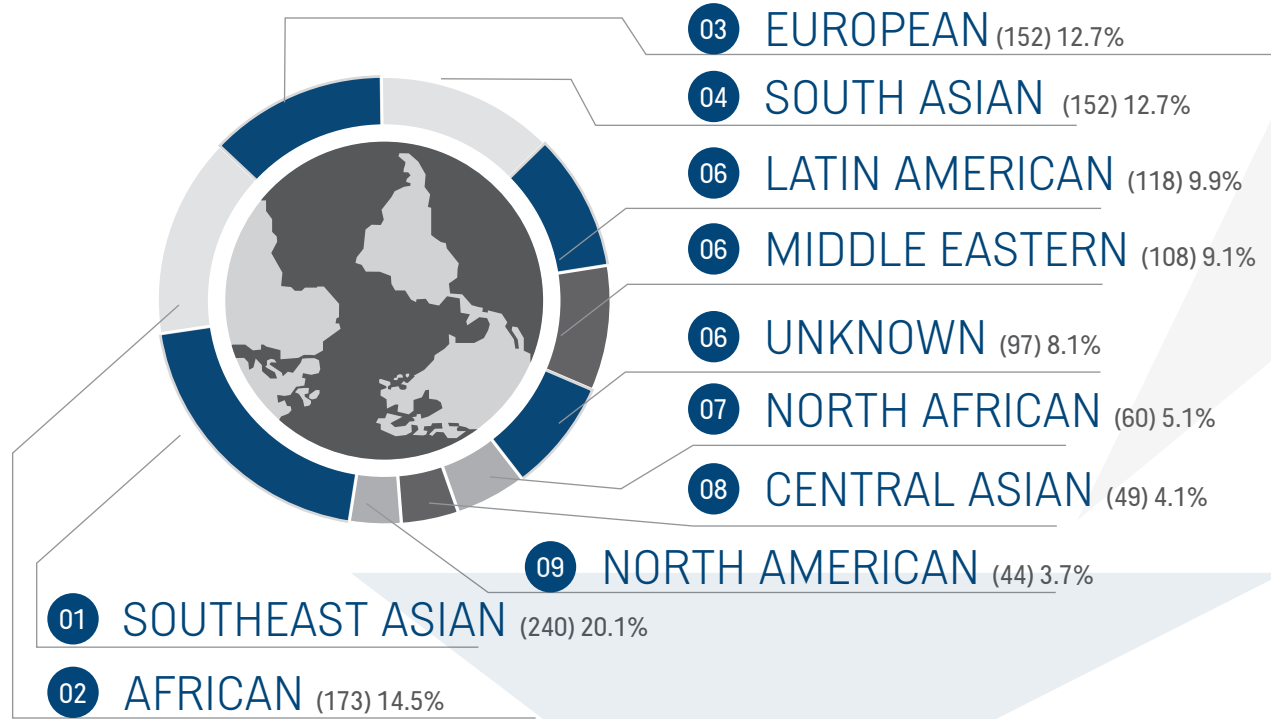


REST OF THE WORLD (482) 40%





## ORIGINS OF VICTIMS



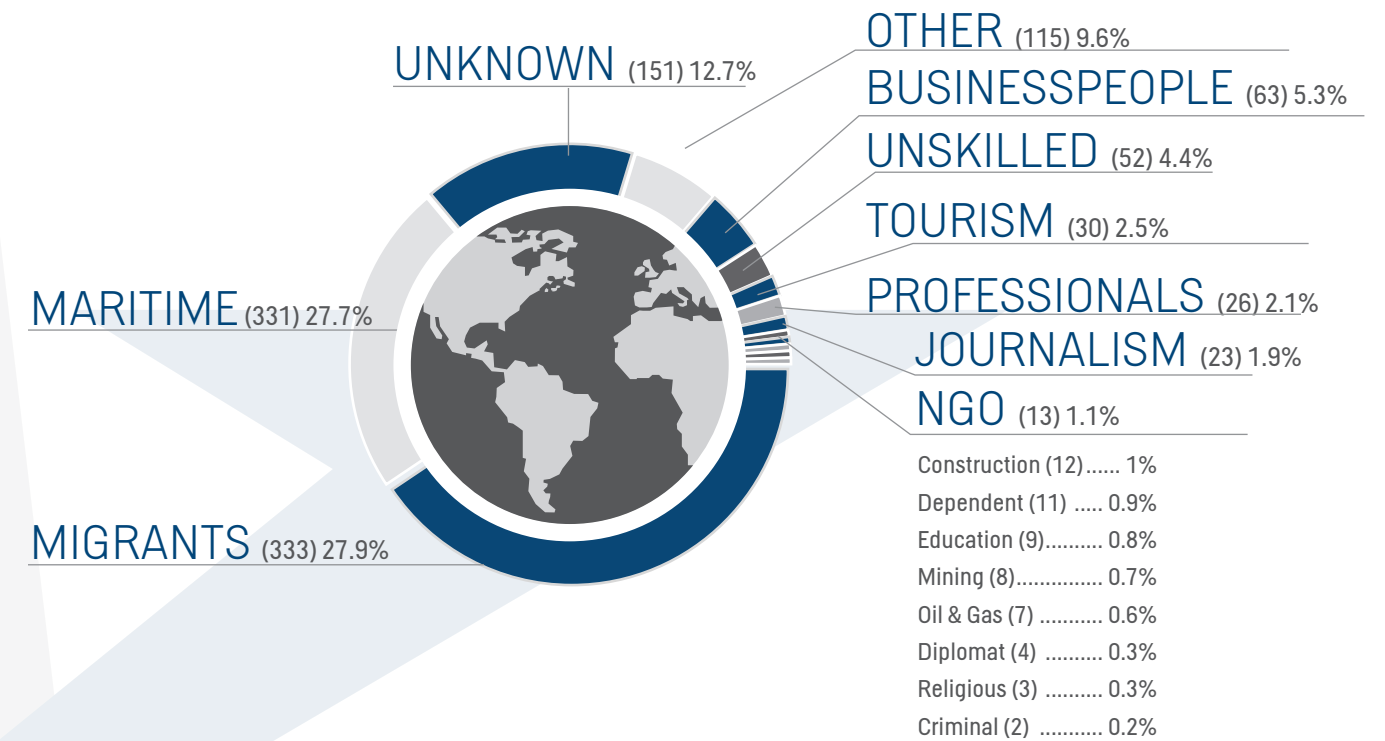
## MOST VICTIMIZED SINGLE NATIONALITY

- 01 Chinese
- 02 Indian
- 03 Russian
- 04 Egyptian
- 05 Bangladeshi
- 06 Syrian
- 07 Nigerian
- 08 American
- 09 Ukrainian
- 10 Venezuelan

## MOST VICTIMIZED ORIGIN BY REGION

REGION	ORIGIN
Africa	African
Americas	Latin American
Asia & Pacific	Southeast Asian
Europe	European
Middle East	Middle Eastern

## VICTIMS BY SECTOR



## MOST VICTIMIZED SECTOR BY REGION

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

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.



# GLOBAL PIRACY UPDATE

Maritime security incidents recorded a 35% increase over the months of November and December 2020, with a total of 99 incidents recorded, in contrast with the 74 registered during the last reporting period (September – October 2020). Most of the incidents consisted of criminal boardings (66%) and low-profile thefts (31%). Additionally, there was a sharp increase in kidnappings in the Gulf of Guinea (GOG). In total, there were 49 crewmembers abducted from seven vessels. This upsurge was in part due to cyclical factors typical of the last two months of the year. On the one hand were the more favourable weather conditions enabling pirate activity in general, especially the boarding of vessels further offshore, with the average kidnapping incident registered over 60NM from shore the coast, according to the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC). Another cyclical pattern is the pirates' increased resolve, motivated by the need for funds for end-of-year expenses. Low-profile thefts in Asia also rose since the last reporting period, particularly in the Singapore Straits, where pirates continue to operate mainly at night time.

On 31 December, a limpet mine was discovered attached to the hull of a Greek-operated tanker while it was performing ship-to-ship oil transfers approximately 28 nautical miles (NM) off Iraq's southern coast. The crew was evacuated and no injuries were reported. Though it is unclear whether the mine was viable and failed to detonate, the incident is indicative of the ongoing tension in the region. Meanwhile in Asia, hostilities between China and the US elevated over the past two months around territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Following the transit of two American guided-missile destroyers on 31 December, China ordered its military to be ready for war 'at any second'. The Chinese government argued that the American action sent 'wrong signals' to Taiwan, which is pushing for 'independence'. The deployment of Chinese vessels could therefore increase in the coming weeks if the US continues to provide open support to Taiwan. While a war is unlikely, fears of violent escalations endure. In other developments, Turkey and Greece agreed to hold peace talks about their dispute over maritime borders and energy rights in the eastern Mediterranean, in early January 2021. Despite this, the prospect of a de-escalation of the conflict and a peaceful resolution remain far-fetched, given the little progress made in the past two years. Meanwhile in Libya, the Libyan National Army (LNA) announced on 10 December the release of the 17 crew from a Turkish cargo ship they had seized three days earlier for 'violating sailing rules'. This release, and a number of others recorded in recent weeks, are likely the result of ongoing talks between the LNA and the Government of National Accord (GNA) and their agreement to a ceasefire. However, the incident is evidence of the complexity of the conflict. Indeed, the seizure served to further strain relations with Turkey, who argued that the MABOUKA had been detained only because of Turkey's support of the GNA. While tension is expected to remain somewhat subdued in the context of the renewed peace talks, future violent incidents, including seizures and detentions, are likely.

Throughout 2020, the Gulf of Aden (GOA) continued on a downward trend, thanks to ongoing international counter-piracy operations. As per established patterns, most of the registered maritime security incidents over November and December consisted of low-profile thefts (65%). While the GOA piracy remained at low levels over the year, it is possible that the COVID-19 outbreak could have a negative impact on the region in the mid- to short-term. The lengthy delays at ports and anchorages might also present pirates with more opportunities to target vessels. The economic recession linked to the pandemic may also translate into a shrinkage of anti-piracy programmes in the GOA. Another serious concern in the region is the threat linked to the conflict in Yemen. In 2020, there were at least six water-borne improvised explosive device (WBIED) incidents recorded off the Yemeni coast. While these mostly targeted vessels linked to the parties in the conflict, this represents a risk to the over 33,000 ships passing through the area every year, which may experience collateral damage in the repeated attacks launched by the Iran-backed Houthi militias and their routinely planting of marine mines.

The number of piracy attacks in the GOG almost doubled in 2020. Most of the incidents were attempted boardings; however, there was also a significant increase in successful kidnappings. While most GOG pirate groups continued to operate out of Nigeria's Niger Delta Region, there were several new piracy hotspots such as Sao Tome and Principe. Moreover, there were reports of a reignition of the Niger Delta conflict, with militant groups in the area allegedly forming alliances with pirate groups to target product tankers. The coronavirus pandemic has also contributed to the increase in piracy by further eroding resources for policing West African territorial waters. Given the increased threat in the region, on 1 November the GOG's High Risk Area was extended, now covering the area between Ivory Coast and the Congo/Angola border. In

view of the situation, Nigeria and other affected countries have come under increasing pressure from the international community, including governments and commercial entities, to engage more actively in combating piracy by enhancing their naval presence and capabilities to respond to the threat. It is likely that GOG's coastal waters will continue to experience a high piracy threat over 2021, including areas that were previously considered unlikely to come under attack.

In Asia, there was no significant increase in attacks in 2020 when compared with 2019. Most incidents continued to be low-profile events. However, one violent incident was recorded on 15 December, when armed pirates temporarily held an officer hostage while looting ship property. No Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) attacks were recorded, though a number of warnings were issued. This, in addition to the continued extension of the curfew in the Eastern Sabah Security Zone, is evidence of the threat posed by the group. Additionally, new data suggests that the ASG is carrying out more operations off the coast of Sulare Island, as opposed to Jolo Island, which has been traditionally used by the group to conduct its maritime attacks since 2015. This shift serves as an early indication of a changing geographic distribution of ASG activity, which could heighten the risk of potential attacks in maritime and coastal areas, particularly across the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Moreover, as ASG becomes increasingly vulnerable on Jolo due to the increasing anti-terror operations carried out by the Philippine forces, the group may attempt to diversify its area of operations and target civilians across a greater extension of territory. As is the case in other regions, the worsening economic environment resulting from the coronavirus pandemic could lead to an increase in attacks in 2021. Indeed, several Asian countries, including Indonesia and Thailand, have already announced budget cuts in their defence spending, which could result in fewer maritime security patrols.





## CASES:

- ▶ An explosion at the Jeddah Port Main Anchorage in Saudi Arabia was reported on 13 December, after the Singaporean-flagged oil tanker BW RHINE struck a WBIED. There were no casualties reported, with all 22 crew being evacuated while the fire caused by the explosion was being extinguished. This was the second WBIED incident off the coast of Saudi Arabia in less than a month.
- ▶ On 21 December, the kidnapped crew of the Lebanese-owned cargo ship MV MILAN 1 were freed following the payment of a ransom. According to the vessel's owner, the ransom demand was initially USD 2 million, later decreasing to USD 300,000. The ten victims, including two Egyptians, three Lebanese, one Cameroonian, and four Indians, were kidnapped off the Nigerian coast on 26 November, while on their way to Douala, Cameroon.



# CYBER SECURITY

## 2020 CYBER SECURITY REVIEW AND 2021 OUTLOOK

2020 was characterised by a massive shift towards remote working, with 43% of employees having worked remotely at some point during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hand-in-hand with this transformative period was an added emphasis on cyber security, given the associated vulnerabilities of home working and the lack of IT security oversight that comes with it. Over the year, some 63% of cyber incidents were reportedly the result of negligence, either by staff or contractors, costing companies on average USD 4.58 million. The overall estimated global cost of cyber crime reached almost USD 1 trillion, a more than 50% increase on the previous two years. While a significant proportion of this figure can be attributed to better and more open reporting, recorded cases of ransomware and phishing attacks have escalated exponentially, accelerated by the chaos surrounding the coronavirus crisis. A byproduct of the situation was a dramatic increase in COVID-related scams and attacks, particularly those targeting healthcare. Breaches to this sector have been the most expensive, costing organisations USD 7.13 million on average.

Some of the top threats observed in 2020 included ransomware, data breaches and leaks, phishing, mobile attacks, supply chain attacks, web-based and web application attacks, and identity theft. Of the top attack types, while posing a persisting threat, cryptojacking and cyber espionage trended downwards. Evidencing the symbiosis of remote working and increased cybercrime, businesses experienced a reported 20% increase in cyber threats this year. In the UK, for instance, organisations faced on average 686,961 attempts to breach their corporate networks, equating to an attempted attack every 46 seconds, up from 576,575 attacks in 2019.

Across the world, ransomware attacks surged over 2020, with a seven-fold increase from the previous year. This spike in ransomware infections is largely the result

of organisations having to make rapid infrastructural changes in COVID-19 times, often making them more vulnerable to cyber attacks. Some of the worst affected countries were India, Sri Lanka, Spain, Germany, Russia, Turkey, the US and the UK. The most virulent strains of ransomware were Maze and Ryuk. This surge in attacks was also driven by organisations' increasing willingness to pay ransoms to retrieve their data or stop it from being leaked online. As a result, an increase in the average ransom payment demanded was observed, growing to over USD 230,000 by the end of the year, up by 30% with regards to the first half of 2020.

Another area of major concern has been the spike in data breaches, with at least 36 billion records exposed in 2020, double that of the previous year, highlighting the increased value of personal and company data to threat actors. Moreover, some 20% of reported breaches this year contained a ransomware component. This reflects the growing trend in double extortion attacks, whereby hackers not only hold an organisation's data to ransom, but also threaten to leak it online.

In 2020, some 86% of cyber attacks were reported to have been financially-motivated, the majority carried out by organised criminal groups and external actors. Harder to determine is the level at which attacks have state sponsorship, a phenomenon believed to have intensified this year. According to a recent survey of technology officials in the US, approximately 50% of respondents believe that state-sponsored cyber warfare now poses the biggest risk to their organisations. These findings follow recent major hacks against over 50 US government agencies, including the US Treasury and Department of Homeland Security. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has accused Russia of being behind the attacks, claiming they were attempting to steal data related to national security. A number of Israeli organisations have

also been targeted over the course of the year, including water infrastructure facilities, insurance company Shirbit, and technology companies Amital Data and Habana Labs. Several of the groups identified in these attacks have been traced back to Iran.

Software supply chain attacks were also on the rise in 2020, surging by over 430% last year. With enterprises more reliant on open source and third party software, such attacks involve the seeding of viruses to these software components, which are then taken up by unsuspecting organisations. Indeed, the recent attacks against US government agencies resulted from a supply chain attack that affected one of their IT providers, unwittingly spreading malicious code to thousands of their clients.

With the COVID-19 pandemic still raging and remote working a mainstay for the foreseeable future, many of the trends observed in 2020 are expected to persevere

### CASES:

- ▶ On 17 December, the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) warned of a number of cyber attacks targeting US federal agencies and infrastructure, believed to have begun as early as March 2020. Approximately 50 organisations suffered major breaches, while 18,000 were found to have malicious code in their networks. The source of the breach was a software supply attack on SolarWinds, a Texas-based IT company managing the networks of the affected organisations. Rather than disrupt operations, the hackers appear to have been interested in only stealing data. The attack, known as Sunburst, is believed to have emanated from Russia, and is thought to be the worst cyber incident ever recorded against the US government.
- ▶ On 1 December, Israeli insurance company Shirbit acknowledged it had been targeted in a double-extortion ransomware attack by the 'Black Shadow' hacker group. After Shirbit reportedly refused to pay the 50 bitcoins (or USD 1 million) demanded, the hackers announced they had sold part of the stolen data, which included customer and employee personal details, including that of high-profile individuals in the government, thus posing a potential threat to national security. This was the latest in a series of cyber attacks against Israeli organisations, thought to originate in Iran.
- ▶ On 26 October, six US hospitals were struck by Ryuk ransomware, causing IT outages. The attacks were featured in a government advisory released shortly afterwards, which also included a list of 400 targeted hospitals, found circulating amongst Russian hacking groups. The incident follows a major breach of patient information at 46 US hospitals between 7 February and 20 May 2020, which saw over 1 million records exposed. The data breach occurred as a result of an attack against Blackbaud, a data hosting company used by the affected hospitals.



(Photo: csusb.edu)



# FOCUS ARTICLE

## KIDNAP FOR RANSOM IN HAITI

Haiti, the third most populated country in the Caribbean and one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere, experiences severe levels of crime, with kidnapping for ransom as one of the main security threats. Underdevelopment, high levels of corruption and impunity, as well as persistent political instability, are some of the main structural problems creating this poor and complex security environment.

While once rare, kidnapping for ransom has become a common feature in Haiti's recent history. Kidnappings began to proliferate in 2004, along with general crime levels, following violent uprisings against then president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Kidnapping for ransom spiked the following year to reach almost 800 cases. This situation improved in 2007 as a result of the beginning of the mandate of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), and the launch of a programme by the Haitian National Police (PNH) targeting organised crime and gang violence, particularly in Port-au-Prince. By 2009, the number of reported abductions had already decreased to less than 10% of those reported in 2005. A second wave was then observed in 2010-2012, linked to the crisis following the devastating earthquake of 2010. While levels recorded in this period were considerably below those observed during the first spike, it nonetheless highlighted the enduring high threat of kidnapping in the country.

This was again evidenced in 2020, when exponentially increasing kidnapping levels were witnessed month on month. According to the US Department of State, at least 200 kidnappings were reported in Haiti in 2020, up from only 78 in 2019 and 46 in 2018. Actual numbers are believed to be much higher, with a large number of incidents going unreported, particularly as the participation of the security forces is suspected in many instances.

Indeed, according to local NGO sources, nearly 3,000 kidnappings took place in Haiti in 2020, of which at least 1,270 cases were registered in the first half of 2020 and over 1,000 in Q4 alone, clearly evidencing the exponential increase of the phenomenon in the country.

In addition to the underlying structural problems favouring kidnapping in Haiti, this new cycle was triggered by a fresh deterioration of Haiti's security environment, linked to a series of contemporary security and socio-political issues. These included anti-government demonstrations against the government of President Jovenel Moïse in late 2019 that worsened after the indefinite suspension of parliament in January 2020, an ongoing delay of elections, and the socio-economic crisis resulting from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the main reason was the withdrawal of the international forces following the conclusion of the United Nations Mission For Justice Support In Haiti (MINUJUSTH) in October 2019, which put an end to 15 consecutive years of peacekeeping operations in the country. This left Haiti in the hands of the underdeveloped local security forces, thus creating a considerable security gap that gangs swiftly exploited. The recent spiral in kidnap cases, along with other violent crime, has in turn exacerbated popular discontent with the government.

The current security situation in Haiti has led to several Western governments issuing travel alerts for the country, increasing threat ratings and consequently travel restrictions. For example, in March 2020, the US government changed its travel advisory to Haiti to Level 4 "Do not Travel". Most recently, on 2 December, the US embassy in Haiti announced that it had limited non-official travel of its US citizen staff to the immediate Embassy neighbourhood until further notice. The security alert also warned US citizens against unnecessary travel in the Port-au-Prince area due to the dramatic increase in kidnap for ransom cases in the city. Meanwhile, the French government in October recommended avoiding travel to Haiti, formally discouraging visits to most areas of Port-au-Prince, as a result of the recent significant upsurge in kidnapping.

### PERPETRATORS

The majority of kidnaps in Haiti are carried out by urban-based gangs. These gangs mostly originated in the 2000's, with the patronage of the political elites who sought to develop them into becoming their personal militias. While effective security operations by the MINUSTAH and PNH achieved the dismantling of many of these groups, many were re-established following the large prison break recorded in 2010, with others surviving due to their resilience. It was calculated that in 2019 there were at least 80 such gangs in the country. These groups have their hubs mainly in the Port-au-Prince slums, from where they draw their recruits from among the most impoverished. According to recent reports, some of these outfits have now united in powerful syndicates, becoming more sophisticated and effectively exerting rule in their areas of operation and rendering them no-go areas, even for the security forces. All of this allegedly counts once again with the support of the political establishment up to the highest levels, who reportedly use these groups as a tool of repression, as well as to protect their economic and personal interests. In addition to the tacit tolerance given to gang activity in the country, the active involvement of members of the police in the

Haitian kidnap for ransom industry has also been documented. Furthermore, a growing number of inexperienced groups and individuals have been found to be participating in this illicit activity, given the easy profits and low prosecution rates.

### VICTIMS

While in the past kidnapping mainly affected wealthier individuals, at present the phenomenon has become so widespread that it affects people from all Haitian social strata. People at the lowest economic tiers are mainly the victims of opportunistic kidnapping. Having said that, businesspeople, politicians, social leaders and their relatives, as well as people deemed to be wealthier, such as foreign nationals, are the preferred targets for sophisticated gangs, who conduct extensive surveillance of targets, both physical and online. These gangs are also known to have a network of informants and spotters who can help identify potential targets. It has been reported that kidnappers sometimes use victims' mobile phones to build up their bank of prospective targets.

The number of abducted foreign nationals has skyrocketed throughout 2020, in line with the general national trend. For instance, while the US government reported the abduction of one US citizen in Haiti in 2019, by 2020 this increased to at least 23. At least seven more foreign nationals, including French, Dominicans and Canadians, have also been victims of abduction or attempted kidnappings in the country this year.

### RANSOMS & CAPTIVITY

According to information collected by the US authorities, reported ransom payments in Haiti in 2020 ranged on average between USD 5,000 to 29,000, though payments as high as USD 300,000 have been recorded in the local press. Recently reported ransoms demands have been as high as USD 1.5 million for local nationals, and USD 5 million for foreigners.



Armed gang members in a Port-au-Prince slum. (Photo: Prensa Latina)

Most kidnap victims are released following the payment of ransoms, though in many instances this is denied by those involved. On average, victims endure captivities no longer than a week, evidencing a business model based on a quick turnaround of victims. That being said, there are reports of increasing instances where the victim dies, either trying to fight back, or in the absence of a financial agreement with the victim's family. Occurrences of double-dipping (kidnappers not releasing a victim despite a ransom having been paid and instead demanding a second payment) have also been recorded in recent months.

## GEOGRAPHY

While kidnaps can take place anywhere in Haiti, the great majority continue to occur in Port-au-Prince and its surroundings. In recent months, areas particularly affected by this phenomenon have included Delmas and Carrefour, in addition to slum areas such as Village de Dieu, Cité Soleil, Martissant and Grand Ravine, where gangs often keep their victims. Other areas such as Croix des Bouquets, Gauthier, Santo, Clercine and Nazon have also registered incidents over the past year, as well as affluent neighbourhoods such as Pétiion-Ville, Pèlerin and Thomassin. An increasing

number of incidents have also been registered at Toussaint Louverture International Airport and its thoroughfares. Kidnappings also take place at unofficial roadblocks, as well as during attempted carjackings and home invasions. Individuals should also be cautious when leaving banks or ATMs after withdrawing cash.

## OUTLOOK

The climate of insecurity continues to worsen in Haiti, despite announcements by de facto Prime Minister Joseph Jouthe suggesting that peace and security would be restored before the end of 2020.

Indeed, while the current government has initiated a series of security operations in the capital's slums targeting gang activity, these have so far not produced any meaningful results, evidenced by the continuing daily kidnaps. Even if results were to be achieved in the medium term, these are unlikely to last, as the underlying structural problems remain unresolved. Moreover, Haiti's security issues and delayed elections continue to fuel civil unrest, further feeding the instability and lawlessness in which armed gangs thrive.



# 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](http://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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