

## Experienced Advice Crucial in Response to Kidnappings

By Bob Macpherson, Christine Persaud and Norman Sheehan

**T**he high-profile kidnapping of nongovernmental organization (NGO) staff members over recent years raises concerns about organizational vulnerability and staff preparedness. NGOs increasingly operate in environments of escalating violence, which is often targeted directly at them. Beginning in the late 1990s, a security model based on community acceptance became the standard for staff safety. This strategy involves reducing or removing the threat by gaining widespread understanding and acceptance for NGOs' presence and work. The way projects are designed and carried out, and how a

humanitarian organization reacts to events must be transparent and consistent with the guiding principles it has communicated. If the community or government clearly recognizes and supports the NGO's purpose, they become part of the security network, which will provide warning of possible changes in the security environment.

This model fits well with NGO culture and focus on "rights-based programming." It is a good foundation and serves our community well. However, we may have become too reliant on it as an end state and not recognized changes that have evolved over the past several years.

The humanitarian community has experienced kidnappings for decades, but they have generally been a means to extort money or remuneration from a specific NGO, the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross, or other such organizations. These were generally criminal acts and expected to be negotiated. However, within the past five years, this has changed. Humanitarian workers are being abducted for political reasons, with the kidnapping providing media attention to a group or individual's political grievances. In addition, criminal kidnappings have increased significantly and national

staff is subject to the greatest number of these abductions. An estimated 90 percent of NGO kidnappings involve national colleagues. As a result, NGOs are attending courses and seeking training and expert advice from individuals and organizations, which provide varying degrees of relevance and expertise.

Two principles are involved when an NGO employee is kidnapped. These should be recognized from the beginning of the event. First: if the victim is an international staff member, this crime, by international law, should be addressed between governments. Everyone else who is party to the event is involved only through the request of the host nation and the national government of the victim. Second: negotiation is an art. Professional kidnapping and hostage negotiators are trained for years and serve in an apprentice role before achieving certification by a reputable government.

With the increasing number of NGO kidnappings, there is a commensurate increase in companies and individuals who offer "hostage and kidnap courses." These generally last for several days. Many of the courses focus on negotiation techniques. In very rare circumstances, an NGO will find itself in a situation where the organization has no choice other than to serve as the primary negotiator. Certainly, it is worthwhile to have a discussion on how the process of negotiation works, but this should not be the focus of the instruction. It is critical that all NGOs vet the qualifications of a person who advertises skills as a negotiator or expert. In addition, many of the individuals with whom we become involved are experienced primarily in criminal abductions. In these events, the scenario consists of a series of talks where ransom may be the primary point of negotiation.

For an NGO, this causes two dilemmas. First, we should not pay ransom. This will set a precedent which will make every staff member more vulnerable in the country, in the region and across the globe. Second, many of the incidents involving humanitarian staff are political and not motivated by ransom. These kidnappings are conducted for the sake of terrorism or to use an international staff member as a means to gain attention for a cause via CNN or the BBC. Kidnappings are distinguished by fear, patience, delicacy, cultural awareness and pragmatism. However, dealing with terrorists or

people who use abduction to gain public awareness for their views is a much more dangerous realm of interaction. Thus, kidnapping and hostage negotiation must be the domain of consummate, dedicated professionals.

Yet, there are four things international NGOs can do to ensure they are prepared for kidnapping or abduction.

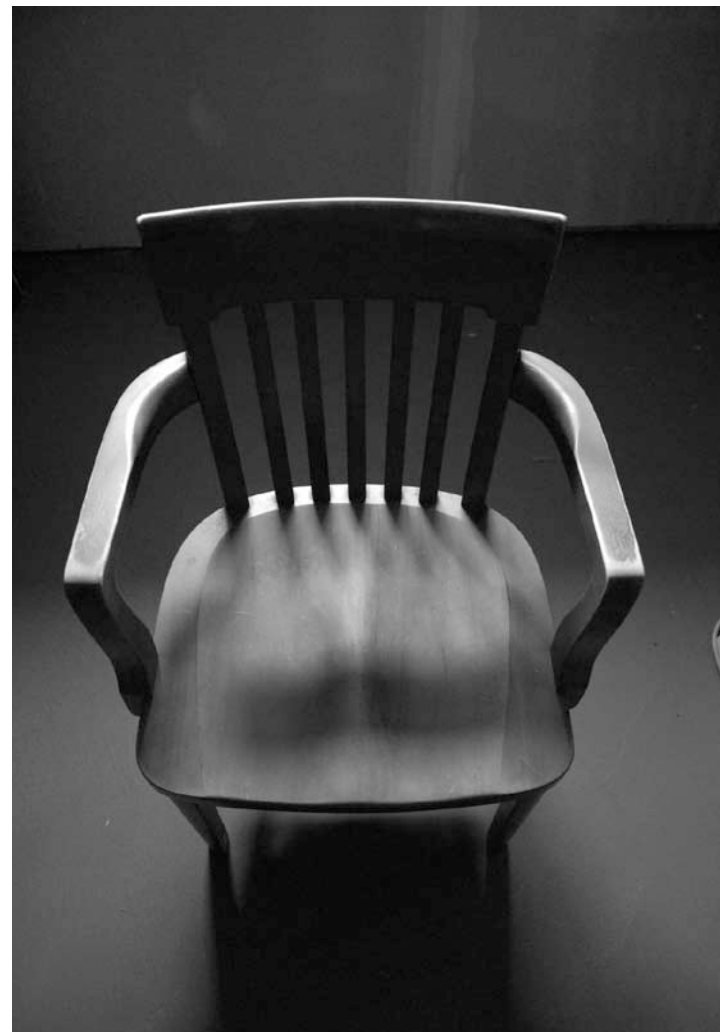
## **Kidnapping/Ransom and Extortion Insurance**

This is a sensitive topic. If an organization has this insurance, it is required to never reveal the coverage. If it does, the insurance will be cancelled. Although the protection may include the cost of a ransom, this is not the primary reason an NGO should have such insurance. Rather, it is because the insurance provides for the immediate deployment of skilled negotiators who will become the backbone of the organization's field response. These men and women represent the NGO with governmental or institutional counterparts. If there are no governments involved and the organization is forced to become the primary agent to win a staff member's freedom, these representatives will take the lead.

## **Crisis Management Plan**

The Crisis Management Plan is designed to prepare and implement a timely, prudent and effective response to kidnapping, an extortion attempt or the threat of kidnapping or extortion directed against the organization's employees, families, and/or their guests, facilities, operations, assets or reputation. It is the foundation for the NGO's response and serves as the institutional guideline when emotions and stress are greatest. The InterAction Senior Security Coordinator can provide a list of reference materials regarding a Crisis Management Plan.

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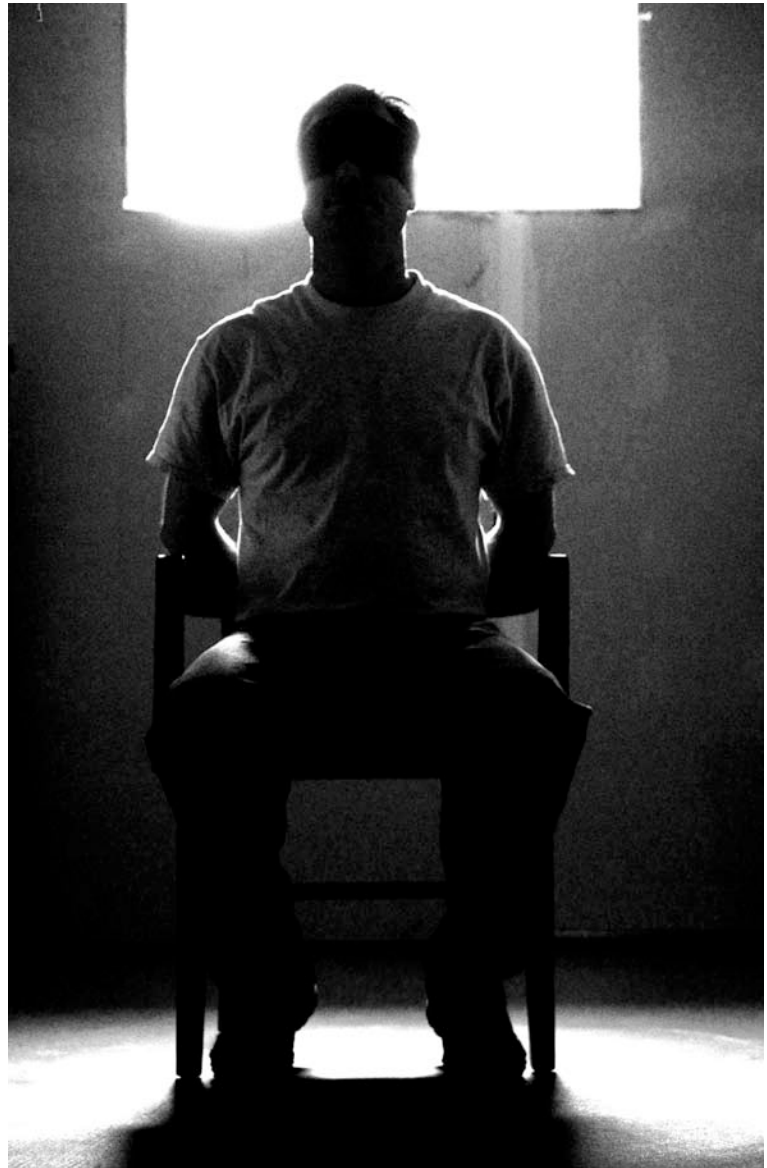
## Family Support

The emotional impact of the situation requires that families are kept informed with accurate information and knowledge of the organization's efforts and the links between governmental and nongovernmental institutions to resolve the situation. In most cases, the victim's government will provide some degree of this type of assistance. However, it may be the last priority of a conventional governmental response and it may be clumsy. Thus, the NGO can be of significant help to the family. In addition, the assistance does not end with the victim's release. The staff member's return begins the next step, which is delicate. The victim, the family and some of the people who were involved in the process will need counseling. While the government representatives, negotiators and other support personnel will depart, those who remain face serious challenges involving post-traumatic stress.

## Media

Planning is essential to ensure that inquiries from the news media, donors and staff are handled effectively. One person should be designated to speak for the organization. Once the event becomes public knowledge, it is the role of the public relations unit to filter information to avoid harm to the victim. Everyone will want to know something. The public relations representatives will have to decide what is appropriate and what is not. It is important to make people feel a personal attachment to the well being of the staff member. As a result, the overarching goal should be to work with media sources to humanize the victim.

A kidnapping or abduction is frightening, emotional and chaotic. Proper preparation and protocols will ease some of the stress and confusion. The first 48 hours are the most



crucial, often characterized by inaccurate or conflicting information. A sound crisis management plan for immediate actions is the most important tool to manage a crisis. The procedures are essential and the most senior staff in the organization must engage them. Humanitarian organizations cannot overlook the fundamental requirements to protect staff and their families. There are no guarantees, but preparation and knowledge are essential.



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