KIDNAP FOR RANSOM THREAT STILL HIGH IN PHILIPPINES

INSIGHTS ARTICLE

SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES: REGULAR KIDNAPPINGS IN 2018 SHOW KIDNAP FOR RANSOM REMAINS A SERIOUS CONCERN

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On 28 June 2018 a kidnap for ransom group based in Zamboanga, southern Philippines, kidnapped six persons and demanded a ransom sum of PHP400,000 (USD7,500) for their release. At the beginning of June, the Communist insurgent group the New People's Army (NPA) abducted a Filipino soldier and militiaman southeast of southern Davao City, and on 20 June the Islamist militant Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) kidnapped the relatives of a Sulu mayor Tambrin Tulawie.

Although NYA’s K&R database has recorded 55% fewer kidnapping incidents in the Philippines between January and June 2018 compared with the same period in 2017, Filipino militant groups retain the capability and intent to target wealthy domestic and foreign nationals – particularly in the central and southern regions of the Philippines. The most prominent militant groups in this area remain ASG, NPA, the Islamic State (IS)-linked Maute group and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). The security forces’ inability to establish law and order in southern pockets of the Philippines means that the kidnapping threat is unlikely to be abated in the medium to long term, making the region a high-threat destination, especially for foreign nationals.

Image 1: Concentration of kidnapping incidents in the Philippines (July 2015-July 2018)

Source: NYA K & R Database / Espatial

OUR VALUES

Since 1990 we have been committed to helping clients understand the threats to their people, information, property and reputation. Our global team provides you with the expertise to mitigate and manage security risks so that you can focus on opportunities and meet objectives.
ABU SAYYAF – WEAKENED, BUT STILL A THREAT IN THEIR SULU HEARTLANDS

Following the death of ASG leader Isnilon Hapilon in Marawi city in October 2017, the militant group has come under increasing pressure and has mostly retreated to its heartlands in the Sulu islands, especially on Basilan and Jolo. It is expected that in the short to medium term the group will seek to perpetrate as many opportunistic kidnaps for ransom as it can in order to improve its financial situation. However, their operational reach will be limited to the Sulu Archipelago and Zamboanga for the medium term. It is highly unlikely the group currently has the resources to carry out large-scale intelligence-led kidnappings of the type which gave notoriety to ASG in the early 2000s – for example the kidnapping of 21 tourists at the Malaysian island resort of Sipadan in April 2000. In fact, the group’s maritime kidnap operations have become less effective of late. NYA MarTrack™ shows that the last successful Abu Sayfaf vessel hijacking occurred almost eight months ago, in October 2017.

MAUTE GROUP AND BANGSAMORO ISLAMIC FREEDOM FIGHTERS – THE MOST THREATENING MILITANT GROUPS AT PRESENT

BIFF primarily operates in western Mindanao, southwest Philippines. BIFF has regularly clashed with security forces in 2018 and perpetrated several small-scale bomb attacks. BIFF is now believed to be IS’s main affiliate group in the Philippines, and reportedly fight alongside jihadists from Indonesia and Malaysia. On 10 June Philippine military units assaulted a BIFF bomb factory in western Mindanao and killed 15 militants. BIFF has not targeted foreign or wealthy domestic nationals for kidnap; however, it is highly likely should the opportunity arise they will do.

The Islamist militant Maute Group are also showing signs of resurgence. Maute Group operative Abu Dar is believed to be the new IS “emir” in Southeast Asia. The Philippine military launched operations in June to try and capture him but did not succeed. On 19 June government forces destroyed a Maute Group camp near Marawi which caused the displacement of around 11,000 people. As with ASG, kidnap for ransom is a stock tactic for the group. The group infamously kidnapped Catholic priest Fr Teresito Suganob in May 2017 along with dozens of other Christians and it has also been accused of kidnapping and murdering local habitants in the vicinity of Marawi.

NEW PEOPLE’S ARMY - COMMUNIST GUERRILLAS STILL ACTIVE

Finally the militant Communist insurgent group NPA has continued to carry out kidnappings and attacks on security forces and this is almost certain to continue for the long term. On 6 July 2018 three members of the NPA were killed by government forces near Davao City. Whilst the NPA has cells and support throughout the Philippines, it is in the south that the NPA has been especially active of late. On 5 July 2018 the NPA’s leaders rejected the Philippine government’s most recent demands for peace talks to progress, and NPA leader Jose Maria Sison told journalists that “There will be more guerrilla offensives...while [President Rodrigo] Duterte is in power.” Whilst the NPA predominantly targets security forces to avoid alienating non-aligned civilians, they do attack businesses and landowners – using bombs, assassinations and other methods.

OUTLOOK

Although the Philippines has enjoyed strong economic growth over the past 18 months, with the World Bank describing the country as one of the top three growth performers in the Southeast Asia region in 2017, the southern Philippines is home to one third of the Philippines’ poor. There are around 2 million unemployed people in Mindanao and approximately half of the working force are only employed informally according to the World Bank. Therefore, poverty and unemployment provide fertile conditions for the development of militancy and criminality. It is almost certain the southern Philippines will remain a kidnap hotspot for the long term.
HOW CAN NYA HELP?

NYA’s Crisis Response team has helped numerous clients contend with crisis incidents, including kidnap for ransom in the Philippines. Last year NYA advised on over 120 crisis incidents around the world. The NYA Response team comprises 14 nationalities, based in 16 countries around the world and speaks 16 different languages including Spanish, French, German, Portuguese, Russian, Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese, Arabic and Farsi. Response consultants have backgrounds in the military, law enforcement, intelligence agencies and the commercial security sector, ensuring that teams deployed are well experienced and working to best practice standards.