

Crisis Consulting International

Special Advisory

Release of South Korean Hostages and Increased Risk to Faith-Based Personnel

Summary

The release of the surviving 19 South Korean hostages held by the Taliban in Afghanistan since July 19, 2007 carries very real increased risk to missionaries and faith-based workers.

1. The South Korean government made an agreement with the Taliban to ban future missionary activity in Afghanistan, a watershed event that had been resisted in prior hostage negotiations for kidnapped Christians.
2. The Taliban, now an insurgency (or, at best, a non-state actor) rather than an incumbent government, was able to elevate itself by directly engaging a state (South Korea) in negotiations.

The circumstances of the negotiations and the agreement leading to the release will increase the probability of future kidnappings of Christian missionaries and relief workers in Afghanistan and other venues.

Analysis

We need to begin by clearly stating that it is not the purpose or intent of this Advisory or the intention of CCI to criticize the actions of the South Korean government and other participants in the process that led to the release of these hostages. We have “been there and done that” (serving as the hostage negotiators for kidnapped missionaries) and appreciate that there are always dynamics and factors known only to the negotiators and decision-makers. However, there are often

unintended or unavoidable consequences resulting from hostage negotiations, and in this case those consequences include clear, foreseeable and imminent risk to others. Our objective is to inform about that increased risk, not to judge or criticize the process and decisions that may have led to it.

Shortly after the July 19 kidnapping of 23 South Korean Christians in Afghanistan, the government of South Korea publicly entered the negotiation process and sent a high-ranking delegation to Afghanistan. This delegation ultimately negotiated with representatives of the Taliban in a process at least passively condoned by the Afghan and U.S. governments. The negotiation process appeared to gain traction following the execution of two of the hostages.

Original demands of the Taliban included a ransom and the release of Taliban prisoners held by various governments. These have been typical Taliban demands in kidnapping cases since its overthrow in 2001 by U.S. led forces. The prisoner release demand is common almost to the point of routine in these types of hostage events; however, the agreement by the Afghan government to free Taliban prisoners in exchange for a kidnapped Italian journalist in March, 2007 sent a loud, clear signal to the Taliban (and every other group in the world that engages in hostage taking). The kidnapping of the South Korean Christians almost certainly was committed with an expectation that a prisoner release was a realistic possibility. However, international condemnation of

the Afghan government’s March deal resulted in a return to prisoner release being one of the “non-negotiables” during this hostage negotiation. This likely left the negotiators (on both sides) in a “now what do we do?” dilemma. The killing of two hostages resulted in the desired pressure on the South Korean government to find a resolution; and most likely even the most ardent Taliban realized that the group could not weather the retaliation certain to result from the execution of all 23 of the hostages. Some suitable alternative demand/concession had to be identified.

We don’t know whether the demand to ban South Korean missionaries from Afghanistan originated with the Taliban or was an offer extended by South Korea. From a risk assessment perspective, it doesn’t matter. The result is a situation where a terrorist kidnapping of Christian workers resulted in an agreement to remove (prevent from returning) a group of Christian missionaries from an entire nation that the antagonist does not control. Not only in Afghanistan, but in any location where there is a clash of Christian and Moslem evangelism, Islamist terrorists and insurgents will take note of South Korea’s concession.

The removal of Christian missionaries from any location has been an absolute non-negotiable in all hostage cases CCI has been aware of or involved in since 1983. This non-negotiable standard has only been breached once in the post – 9/11 era to our knowledge. In that case representatives of the U.S. gov-

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ernment insisted on inserting themselves as negotiators for kidnapped missionaries in an event perpetrated by Islamist terrorists with al Qaeda affiliation. The U.S. negotiators then offered the withdrawal of all Christian missionaries from the region in question as an alternative to a ransom being demanded by the hostage takers. The Christian community, supported by CCI, banded together in that case and prevailed on the U.S. government to withdraw the offer.

Now, however, an event has occurred with a highly-publicized concession by a modern state to withdraw (or prevent from going) Christian missionaries from an entire country; this action as a direct result of the kidnapping of other Christian missionaries. The implications are serious and predictable. We can expect to see additional future kidnappings of Christian workers (whether missionaries or relief workers) with attendant demands that Christian workers leave the area. The patterns of terrorist activities in general and the patterns of hostage events specifically indicate that actions that succeed are repeated. This Taliban kidnapping succeeded (perhaps not with the original goal, but with a result of arguably equal or greater impact). Others will desire to replicate it, and some will almost certainly attempt to do so. Although the most likely venue for additional future events is Afghanistan, the global publicity of this event and the global reach of Islamist terrorism make future events foreseeable in any venue where Christian workers and Islamist terrorists coexist.

There is a second factor in this event that will increase the risk of future kidnappings in similar environments. The Taliban was displaced as a government in 2001 and functions now as an insurgent group (or, very charitably, a 'non-state actor'). Insurgent groups almost always have an objective of increasing their presence and influence on the political stage, and the Taliban certainly fits this profile. During this kidnapping event, the Taliban was able to sit down at the negotiating table with a legitimate state, the government of South Korea. Even the use of intermediaries does not mitigate the fact that the participants were the Taliban and the government of South Korea. For that period of time, i.e., while those negotiations were under way, the Taliban enjoyed an elevated

political status that was a *de facto* result of South Korea agreeing to negotiate with them. The lesson learned by the Taliban: This kidnapping elevated their political status, at least for a time. That is a lesson seldom missed by insurgent groups. The result is a second, but also powerful motive for similar future kidnappings.

Recommendations

1. All Christian agencies working in Afghanistan should immediately review their operations and security procedures in light of this new, changed environment.
2. The nature of the increased risk should be immediately communicated to all Christian workers (missionary and others) working in Afghanistan.
3. Christian agencies in Afghanistan should immediately update their risk assessments in light of this new, changed environment.
4. Christian agencies in any part of the world where Islamist terrorist activities exist should review their operations, risk assessments and security procedures in light of this new, changed environment.
5. Christian agencies in Afghanistan and other parts of the world where Islamist terrorist activities exist should communicate clear guidelines and instructions to all of their staff in the security procedures of profile management, avoidance of routines and predictability, target hardening and the detection and management of surveillance.
6. CCI recommends the convening of a forum where Christian sending agencies can review this development, share experiences and best practices, and consider strategies to inform governments of the unacceptable nature of concessions of this type in missionary kidnapping cases. We will work with agencies such as the EFMA and IFMA to facilitate such a forum. <<



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PRESS RELEASE OF THE WEA

The following statement is provided by the World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission in response to the kidnapping of Koreans in Afghanistan.

- We grieve with the families who have suffered loss of life and we rejoice with those who are now reunited with their families.
- We call upon the church around the world to pray for healing and unity both in the Korean church and the nation of South Korea.
- While we note the complexity of situations dealing with the hostage issue, we also note that in our globalised world the actions of one government can have serious implications globally.
- We denounce any kind of inhuman actions such as hostage taking in any corner of the globe, including Afghanistan, and we pray that the long-standing right of citizens of any country to travel abroad and freely return to their own country without being penalized for so doing will come soon.
- We suggest that organisations with workers in other countries pay careful regard to security warnings issued by their government.

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CCI stands ready to support Christian agencies in the response to this increased threat, to implement these recommendations and additional actions, and to discuss specific issues and situations. We remain the only Christian agency in the world that provides real-time on-site support and assistance in crises and emergencies without charging fees. Contact us:

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