

## 7.9 Abduction, kidnapping and hostage situations

Incidents of abduction – including kidnapping and hostage situations – can entail long-lasting physical and emotional impacts. Preventing, preparing for and responding to an abduction requires organisational investment and planning. This chapter covers good practice in managing abduction risks. It includes guidance on virtual and express kidnappings, which have become more prevalent in recent years, and addresses the long-term impacts and other enduring issues associated with abductions.

### 7.9.1 Definitions

Abduction refers to any illegal, forcible capture of a person. Kidnapping refers to an abduction with the explicit purpose of obtaining something in return for the abductee's release. This is typically a ransom payment, though perpetrators may demand political concessions. In some cases, what may ostensibly be a political cause may, in fact, be extortion.

The term 'hostage-taking' is used to describe a situation where the location of the abductee is known and their release depends on the fulfilment of specific demands. In a siege situation the perpetrators and their hostages have been located and surrounded by security forces, and the perpetrators threaten to kill hostages unless they are given a means of escape.

#### Types of kidnappings

- **Ransom kidnapping** – where the primary motive is financial or political gain. The kidnappers demand a ransom from the abductee's family or associates in exchange for their release. The kidnappers may also demand the release of prisoners, policy changes or publicity for their cause.
- **Express kidnapping** – where the victim is held for a short period, typically less than 24 hours, and forced to provide a quick ransom payment (e.g. by withdrawing money from an ATM). Express kidnappings are generally opportunistic and will not have involved much planning.

- **Virtual kidnapping** – where criminals attempt to coerce victims into paying a ransom by falsely claiming they have kidnapped someone they know. Tactics include keeping the victim on the phone to prevent them from verifying the person’s safety or the authenticity of any audio or video recording of the supposed victim. This type of kidnapping has been aided in recent years by new technologies, notably AI.
- **Tiger kidnapping** – where people known to a target are abducted, and the target is forced to participate in a crime, such as accessing a secure location to steal cash, to ensure their safe release.

### 7.9.2 Planning, preparation and training

To contend with the threat of abduction, organisations need to assess who is most at risk and tailor their risk mitigation and preparedness measures to the context. Regular training, simulation exercises, appropriate resourcing, continuous learning and adaptability are essential for both prevention and response. Example actions are outlined below.

#### At the head office level

- Establishing and maintaining up-to-date security policies and protocols specifically addressing abduction risks – and ensuring that all staff members are aware of these policies and receive orientation.
- Creating an organisational crisis management structure with relevant staff selection and training.
  - ▶ *To learn more about the crisis management structure see Chapter 4.4.*
- Establishing links locally and internationally to ensure expertise for effective incident management support as and when required. For example, discussing what government help can be expected if a staff member is abducted or identifying qualified external experts for crisis management and post-crisis support to abductees and their families.<sup>115</sup>
- Keeping staff records up to date, including the contact details of close relatives and any medical conditions. Consider having all staff document ‘proof of life’ questions (see more on this below).

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<sup>115</sup> There are several specialised response organisations that will support organisations and families throughout abduction events, with many associated with special insurance policies. Some governments maintain dedicated law enforcement teams to engage if one of their citizens is involved in an abduction.

- Being clear about responsibilities and obligations to staff and their families in the case of abduction – including where staff are seconded.
- Fully informing staff of the abduction risk before assigning them to high-risk areas.
- Preparing templates or guidelines for media statements and press releases in case of an abduction.
- Training staff on abduction risk mitigation strategies and how to survive an abduction.
- Ensuring that insurance policies are in place, including medical insurance, and special risks or kidnap and ransom insurance.

#### At the operational office level

- Ensuring there is a staffed and trained organisational crisis management structure in place.
- Ensuring awareness of the organisation's kidnap and ransom policy and that staff are prepared to respond to abductions (including calls from kidnappers).
- Developing abduction-specific contingency plans and regularly reviewing and updating these and standard operating procedures.
- Establishing and maintaining effective and reliable communication channels to report incidents and share notifications during the management of a critical incident.
- Establishing and maintaining contact with relevant embassies (if abductees are foreign nationals) and other diplomatic actors, such as the UN, in coordination with the country's crisis management team.
- Knowing who to contact in the government in the event of an abduction and, if there are specialist teams, investing time in understanding how they operate and respond.
- Being informed about the command structure of the national security forces and other relevant armed actors in the organisation's area of operation.
- Understanding government policy on contact with perpetrators – entering into direct negotiations with perpetrators could have serious consequences.
- Ensuring that clear records are kept and maintaining confidentiality. These records should be marked as 'Privileged', and staff should expect that the records may at some point be called for as part of an enquiry.
- Being prepared to provide psychosocial support to affected staff and their families and address trauma and stress-related issues.

- See Chapter 5.4 for more details on staff care following a critical incident.

### **Kidnap, ransom and extortion insurance**

Kidnap, ransom and extortion insurance is specifically designed to protect individuals and organisations against associated financial losses and liabilities.

While terms and coverage vary by policy and insurer, kidnap and ransom insurance can provide:

- 'Preventative services', such as country-specific information and guidance.
- The provision of crisis response consultants who can offer negotiation support and strategic advice.
- Cover for lawsuits, public relations, rest and rehabilitation expenses, medical and psychiatric care, personal accident compensation, loss of income and any other related legal liabilities. It might also cover ransom reimbursement if this is not illegal in the relevant jurisdiction (for example, if perpetrators are sanctioned groups or individuals).

Kidnap, ransom and extortion insurance usually includes a confidentiality clause, with only senior management being briefed on policy details. It is important that organisations can discuss the insurance plan with staff without compromising this. Organisations can develop a statement and nominate a spokesperson in case of enquiry.

Some insurance plans allow for 10% of the annual premium to be deducted for preparation and training.

- See Chapter 5.4 for more details on insurance.

### 7.9.3 Risk reduction measures

The following are examples of measures to reduce abduction risks.

- **Context awareness.** Gathering information on the security context and abduction risks through, for example, security information monitoring, attending context-specific security briefings and understanding the measures adopted by other organisations operating in the same area.
- **Communication and acceptance.** Discussing the organisation's role and work with relevant actors while ensuring high programme quality and acceptance.
- **Avoiding predictability.** Varying routines and travel times, including on commutes and outside of work.
- **Reducing visibility.** Minimising visibility by evaluating branding such as logos on vehicles, being aware of behaviour that might attract attention, using trusted transport rather than identifiable vehicles for some travel, operating in smaller teams and limiting social media presence.
- **Following operating procedures.** Using secure communication channels for sensitive information, ensuring travel risk management measures are in place and followed and maintaining up-to-date contingency plans for unexpected situations.
- **Removing potential vulnerabilities.** Temporarily restricting access to high-risk areas, asking staff to work remotely and considering the suspension of programmes are strategies to consider when there is evidence to suggest heightened risk. Some organisations find it useful to have staff travel with temporary, 'clean' work-related devices such as phones and laptops to prevent the misuse of any stored data. A more drastic measure is to withdraw staff at highest risk.
- **Site security.** Implementing strict access controls and identification procedures at residences, offices and project locations. While abductions often occur when in transit, maintaining secure sites remains crucial.
  - ▶ See Chapter 7.2 – Site security.
- **Heightened awareness and anti-surveillance.** Being vigilant (collectively and individually) about any signs of surveillance and unusual behaviour. An abduction normally involves planning, and the perpetrators may be watching the residence, office and movements of their target for some time before making their move. Regular training on reporting protocols and anti-surveillance practices is recommended.

- ▶ See *Chapter 7.5* for more information on hostile surveillance.
- **Using technology.** Digital tracking equipment can be carried personally or installed in vehicles, allowing for digital alerts and route tracking. Digital tracking equipment should be used with caution and assessed for security risks.
- **Local support and protection.** Building and maintaining good relationships with community leaders and local authorities can help provide access to advice on security measures and potential abduction risks. In some contexts it might also afford some protection. However, power dynamics can shift rapidly, and careful consideration needs to be given to this before or when seeking such support.
- **Armed protection.** Using armed guards or bodyguards can be a deterrent for would-be perpetrators at residences, offices and during travel. However, the use of armed protection can also increase visibility and heighten risk for both the armed personnel and staff. This needs to be carefully evaluated in light of the organisation's policies, principles, image and acceptance measures. It is also critical to consider sanctions and counter-terrorism legislation when using armed protection.
- ▶ See *Chapter 4.2* for a more detailed discussion on armed protection.
- **Public policy of 'no ransom' or other substantial concessions.** Taking a stance on ransoms in policy documents and public communications can make staff less attractive targets. In reality, some money is sometimes paid – by families, private companies, governments and aid organisations. A 'non-payment' strategy is difficult to maintain without sustained preparedness at all levels of an organisation and a high level of community contact and connections with a wide range of stakeholders.

## Mitigating express and virtual kidnapping risks

**Express kidnappings** are usually financially motivated, and kidnapers do not intend to physically harm their targets. Some of the following steps can help mitigate the risks:

- Conducting risk assessments (high-risk areas, likely targets, impact).
- Training staff on situational awareness, how to avoid becoming a target (guidance around ATM use) and responding appropriately for safe release (complying with demands).

- Carrying limited (minimal) valuables and bank cards with low balances or daily withdrawal limits.

**Virtual kidnappings** are designed to get money quickly. Mitigation measures include:

- Training staff on the existence of AI-generated deep fakes and how to identify signs that this is a virtual kidnapping (such as perpetrators trying to keep the target on the call, blocking their efforts to contact/speak to the supposed victim, and rapidly lowering ransom demands).
- Training staff to respond calmly – hang up, contact the supposed victim or ask for details only they would know.
- Ensuring staff are aware that they should not agree to pay a ransom, especially in person, as this could place them at further risk.

#### 7.9.4 Responding to an incident

##### General response considerations

When an abduction occurs, the organisation will typically activate its crisis management structure. Larger organisations may have a crisis management team at the head office level, supported by an incident management team at the operational office or incident site. International organisations might also have a regional crisis management team. These teams are usually supported by colleagues with a broad range of expertise, often from security, health, IT and communications. The organisation will usually identify a designated communicator to convey messages to and from the perpetrators. (This role is not the same as a negotiator, and this individual will not act as a decision-maker or a formal member of a response team.) Response teams often work with other organisations, such as law enforcement, government agencies, the media and insurance companies.

A key responsibility of the crisis management team is to develop and implement a tailored incident response strategy, adjusted as circumstances evolve. This strategy, informed by experts such as legal counsel, helps ensure compliance with relevant legal frameworks and guides the organisation's approach to the

response, including negotiations with perpetrators, stakeholder management and communications. Strategies towards perpetrators, relatives, authorities, media and other organisations will need to be regularly reviewed by the crisis management team.

- ▶ *See Chapter 4.4 for more good practice on how to respond to critical incidents and establish a crisis management structure.*

Actions during the initial phases of a suspected abduction can include:

- Establishing the facts and preparing an incident report.
- Ensuring the safety of other staff, perhaps restricting their movements or moving them to a more secure location.
- Considering whether programmes should be suspended.
- Informing other offices and senior management.
- Informing family members and preparing them for potential contact from the perpetrators.
- Alerting insurance companies.
- Consulting relevant external expertise, in line with the crisis management plan.
- Managing communications and information including setting up a logbook to record events, discussions, decisions, responsibilities and actions taken at all relevant office locations.
- Identifying the designated communicator.
- Monitoring the media for information relating to the incident.
- Ensuring financial readiness to cover initial costs, which may require securing funds from head office.

During the initial stages of an abduction, response staff will often need to be relieved of other duties and provided with a dedicated workspace and facilities. Team members will need regular rest and support, and if the crisis extends for a long period, a smooth handover to alternates.

## Outside experts

In some cases, a specialist in abduction situations may join the crisis management team from outside the organisation, such as from the host or home government, the insurance company or a private security firm. Their role is to advise and support, not to make decisions. Experts in abduction management might come forward voluntarily or they might be recommended. Their knowledge of the local and regional context and their understanding of the legalities – as well as their capabilities, networks and experience – can be invaluable.

While external advisors do not generally manage an incident or engage in direct negotiations with perpetrators, they can add significant value when acting as advisors and coaches to staff, such as the response and media teams. They can offer an objective perspective, help anticipate possible scenarios, help ensure response readiness and evaluate response effectiveness. Care needs to be taken to ensure no conflict of interest arises – for example, in the case of a government-recommended or -appointed expert, there may be misalignment in terms of policies, goals and approaches.

Where staff from multiple organisations are abducted together, collaboration among the different concerned parties is essential to ensure a unified approach. Joint crisis management teams at operational and head office levels are advisable. While each organisation will want to be involved, team members must be chosen for their skill and competence in managing incidents, rather than as representatives of their respective organisations. Outside experts may be brought in to maintain objectivity and focus.

Even when an incident affects only one organisation, there may be implications for the security of others in the same area. There is, therefore, a collective responsibility for security. Payment of a ransom or how an organisation interacts with authorities also has broader security implications. While an organisation whose staff member has been abducted is responsible for choosing the

approach it wants to take, it may still be prudent to listen to advice from others with experience in the area, especially if they have experienced similar situations.

### When the whereabouts of the abductee are unknown

An abduction will be especially challenging when the whereabouts and status of the abducted individual are unknown, and if it is impossible to contact the perpetrators. The targeted organisation may seek to generate publicity about the incident, but as with any media engagement this may be counterproductive if it unnecessarily raises the profile of the abductee and heightens their value to the perpetrators. Alternatively, this may be a good approach if it signals to the authorities that there is widespread awareness of the fate of the person concerned and that their continued abduction would seriously damage the image of the authorities and their capacity to establish or maintain the rule of law. Human rights and other advocacy organisations are generally better at creating this type of publicity than humanitarian organisations, and it may be possible to cooperate with them. In other cases, there may be little that can be done beyond circulating information and pictures of the abductee, and trying to find someone who can provide a lead or a contact.

### Managing relations with the family

- **Immediate contact and family liaison.** Informing the abductee's family promptly is crucial – preferably in person and ideally before they learn of the incident through the media or other third parties. An in-person visit is recommended. Dedicated family liaison functions are advisable. Those in family liaison roles – whether internal or outsourced to specialists<sup>116</sup> – can help to build and maintain trust, and should have strong interpersonal skills and be able to communicate in the family's language. Some governments also have family liaison officers; these should supplement rather than replace organisational engagement.

In some instances, families, particularly if they are local to the context, might prefer to manage abductions themselves drawing on local knowledge and networks, especially if local social or political rivalries drive the abduction.

<sup>116</sup> If an organisation does not have a dedicated or trained family liaison, prior arrangements for support can be made with specialist organisations such as Hostage International: [www.hostageinternational.org](http://www.hostageinternational.org)

However, in criminal or politically motivated cases they may not be better equipped than the organisation. Sometimes staff may be abducted for reasons unrelated to their work, and some organisations may choose not to intervene unless directly implicated. In these circumstances, it is important that the family and the organisation understand and agree on the response strategy and where mutual support may be possible.

- **Developing a clear approach.** Maintaining transparent communication with the family is essential to fostering trust. A lack of trust can lead to the family acting independently – for example going to the media, visiting the location where the abduction took place or attempting their own negotiations. The family will also be more prepared than the organisation to pay a ransom and may start selling assets to collect the money. While families have their own right of initiative, organisations should guide them on the potential consequences and risks of such actions. Paying a ransom does not guarantee release and may lead to further demands.
- **Managing the disclosure of information.** Sharing information with family members and others has to be carefully balanced with the need to effectively manage the incident.

▶ See *Chapter 4.4* for more on *family liaison*.

### Liaising with authorities

It is advisable to inform the authorities – relevant government departments and institutions – immediately about an abduction. This includes authorities in the country where the abduction took place, as well as the government of the country of the abductee (this may involve several authorities if they hold more than one nationality). Even if the abduction occurs in a non-government-controlled area, the government should still be notified.

The crisis management team will need to decide on a policy and how to leverage relations with all relevant authorities. Authorities will have access to information and intelligence, networks and services that may not be available to the organisation and, therefore, may be in the best position to support a release. This is especially the case for authorities in the country where the abduction took place. At the same time, the authorities may have an agenda that is not in the direct interest and wellbeing of the abductee. They may also be mistrustful of the capacity of an aid organisation to handle the abduction properly, or may want to prevent the organisation from entering into dialogue with perpetrators who they may regard as ‘terrorists’ or rebels (in some countries, contact may be illegal).

If the authorities are keen to bring the incident to a rapid conclusion, they may be predisposed to use force instead of, or in conjunction with, any negotiations.

Practicalities and principles to be agreed and confirmed with relevant authorities may include:

- The security, safety and wellbeing of the abductee should be the primary concern.
- The overall response strategy.
- The media strategy (including confidentiality).
- A joint approach to the family – collaboration with any government family liaison officers is beneficial.
- The choice of a communicator (see below).

Some organisations have embedded a staff member in a government response management team. Under such an arrangement, it is important that the organisational representative understands the organisation's position and the boundaries of the relationship.

### **Guidance for initial contact with the local authorities**

- Discuss and agree within the different response teams the line to be taken.
- Prepare a script to inform the authorities of the facts.
- Get in touch with a formal contact, who should already be known.
- Leverage all means to ensure that the security of the abductee is the top priority.
- Anticipate that, once briefed, the authorities may contact and liaise with the media.
- Establish a contact procedure for future briefings.

► See *Chapter 4.4* for more on *liaising with authorities during crises*.

### Managing communications

Managing communication effectively during an abduction involves strategic planning, maintaining confidentiality and coordinating with both internal and external stakeholders to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the abductee and their family.

Sharing details outside the organisation should be carefully assessed, and should only occur as part of a deliberate plan aimed at supporting release. Adopting a 'need-to-know' basis for information sharing is considered good practice.

It is advisable for the crisis management team to decide on communications with internal and external stakeholders, supported by a crisis communications team. The crisis communications team would be responsible for managing media relations, including crafting and implementing communication strategies, monitoring media and appointing a spokesperson. They may also assist in protecting the privacy of the abductee and their family by managing social media. Shutting down social media accounts may be advisable to stop perpetrators from accessing them.

Keeping messages clear and concise helps in managing media coverage. A central message can emphasise that the organisation holds the perpetrators accountable for the staff member's safety and wellbeing, and that all that can be done is being done. Given that different media (international and national) may present the story differently, it is essential that media staff in different offices consult each other before issuing any organisational statements.

To manage media inquiries and public interest, the organisation can post updates on its website. This helps reduce phone inquiries and ensures consistent messaging. Organisations should assume that the perpetrators are monitoring the news, making it unwise to attempt communication or negotiation through public media channels. Media messages can easily become distorted, undermining genuine communication and negotiation efforts. It is important to engage with editors and journalists to encourage collaboration.

If the family wishes to make a public appeal, this should be done constructively and managed carefully. The target audience is usually not the perpetrators but the authorities responsible for security, with messages crafted to ensure continued efforts to resolve the situation.

### Case example: Controlling rumour

During the final phase of negotiations for the release of abducted aid workers in Somalia, controlling rumours became a real challenge. While the situation was still tense, another aid organisation unexpectedly announced that the abductees had been released and had left on a plane the previous day. This rumour circulated immediately within the aid community and was taken up by the local media. It took the organisation involved in the kidnapping two frantic hours to find out where the announcement had come from, and to issue a correction.

Publicity can be beneficial if the perpetrators are sensitive to their reputation, though this is rarely the case for groups that use abductions to garner attention. In such cases, perpetrators can engage the media themselves, transforming the situation into a dangerous spectacle where the abductee's death may be used to create a dramatic climax. Countering this requires persuading the media not to participate in sensationalising the situation.

When there is a possibility that abductees have access to media, sending supportive messages through these channels can help boost their morale.

Effective internal communication – such as through briefings or intranet posts – can help staff feel included and informed in a way that supports and reinforces the formal response effort. Sometimes staff establish voluntary appeal funds to support the family of the abductee.

► *For more on communication and crisis management see Chapter 4.4.*

### Ransom

In principle no ransom should ever be paid, as this increases the general risk of repeat or copycat incidents targeting the same organisation or others in the area. The reality is that, in many cases, some ransom or concession is paid, though organisations may deny this.

Where paying a ransom is a viable potential strategy, a comprehensive legal and political analysis should be conducted beforehand to help identify any potential

legal or financial implications and risks (across all relevant jurisdictions: the country where the incident occurred, the home country of the organisation and the home country of the abductee). That said, political considerations can impact whether a government will enforce this legislation. Organisations should also be aware that, even if they have insurance that covers ransom payments, these are reimbursed afterwards, and therefore the organisation will have to ensure it has the necessary funds to hand to make the payment in the first instance.

### 7.9.5 Negotiations and communications

#### Communicating and negotiating with the perpetrators

A critical element in the negotiations will be the demands made by the perpetrators – and the question of who, in practice, can or should meet them. Perpetrators' objectives and demands can change. There are many examples of situations where political demands withered away, leaving only a demand for money. The reverse can also be true: a criminal gang may 'sell on' an abductee to a politically motivated group if no ransom is forthcoming. If the perpetrators ask for political concessions from authorities, this will be beyond the organisation's control.

#### Guidance for initial contact with perpetrators

- Ensure that a communicator is briefed and has a script for contact; this will need to be in relevant languages.
- Always record the conversation. This may require separate equipment (e.g. a smartphone).
- Adopt a cooperative attitude.
- Ask to speak to the abductee.
- Insist on proof that the abductee is alive.
- Explain the limited responsibilities of the communicator (see below).
- Set a deadline for a reply.
- Establish a procedure for return calls (e.g. telephone number, code word).
- Once contact is established, prepare a revised script for subsequent interactions.

Good practice for communicating with perpetrators includes the following.

- Recording and logging all details and scripts relating to calls with perpetrators. These must remain confidential.
- Assessing the motivations of the perpetrators and determining if their behaviour follows a consistent pattern over time. Are they aggressive and threatening, rational and factual, or highly emotional? What tone and communication style would be most effective in de-escalating the situation and building rapport?
- Requesting proof of identity and possession to confirm that the abductee is still alive and has not been transferred to another group. While a tape or video recording can be helpful, it is not definitive proof of life – especially given the rise in the use of AI (which can replicate voices and videos). The organisation should ask for a specific, intimate detail from the family or a close friend – something the perpetrators are unlikely to know. Proof of life questions can also be used if on record. If no credible proof of identity and life is provided, organisations should consider discontinuing negotiations.

### **Proof of life**

Establishing proof that an abductee is still alive is critical, and organisations should consider mandating proof of life questions as part of next of kin information. Care should be taken as to how this information is stored and transmitted. As soon as possible, additional proof of life questions should be obtained from the family to allow the organisation to continue checking this as the incident progresses. These questions must be unique and easy for the abductee to answer.

- Referring to the abductee by name whenever possible to humanise them in the eyes of the perpetrator and encourage good treatment, including indicating any special needs they may have, for example wearing glasses or taking medication. Signalling other concerns, such as the emotional state of family and children, and exploring whether a way can be found to arrange an exchange of messages, can be beneficial.

- Emphasising that the communicator has no decision-making authority and needs to consult with others. This provides time to think and gives the organisation some room for manoeuvre. At the same time, no indication should be given that a third party (the authorities or a crisis response expert, for instance) is advising the organisation. Preparation is needed in the event perpetrators demand to speak with the decision-maker rather than the communicator.
- Restating the no ransom policy to show that the organisation remains consistent and that the passage of time is not weakening its resolve.
- Agreeing communication times and methods, building in contingencies for issues such as poor mobile coverage and network disruption. This includes establishing a code word with the perpetrators to confirm their identity, ensuring that the organisation is not communicating with impostors.
- Sustaining the communication. Organisations should not break contact with the perpetrators unless there is certainty that the person they are speaking with is not the real perpetrator or that the abductee is no longer alive. The perpetrators should know that the organisation is keen to maintain communication.
- Not agreeing to go to a specified place for an encounter. If there is very strong pressure to do so, the organisation should insist on detailed guarantees of safety. There is a risk of further abductions.

At some point, the organisation's communicator may talk directly to the abducted staff member, and it is important to be clear on what kind of information and messages should be passed on. The communicator should try to avoid providing the abductee with any information that the perpetrators should not know, but reassure them that everything possible is being done to secure their release. Often abductees worry about how their family is coping, and the communicator can try to alleviate this concern.

### **The role of the communicator**

The designation of 'communicator' is deliberately distinct from 'negotiator' as the crisis management team should retain control over any negotiations. Designating a communicator in the initial phases can also serve to create a time lag to allow for internal and external consultation and analysis before responding to perpetrators' demands and adds to the communicator's position that they are not able to make decisions. These individuals should be well rehearsed and supported as they communicate directly with the perpetrators. They usually report directly to the senior decision-making authority of the crisis management

team. As abductions can last for a long time, more than one communicator may be required.

The communicator must be able to effectively manage high levels of stress while adhering to a negotiation strategy. This role may be filled by someone from the organisation or by an external expert. Ideally, the communicator would be a national who is fluent in the perpetrators' language and dialect, understands the culture, and has a solid grasp of the local dynamics and social interactions. They must be reliable and able to work under extreme pressure, available 24/7, and ready to follow instructions from the crisis management team. The communicator needs to be well trained, ideally through simulation exercises, as they are likely to face unexpected demands and pressures from the perpetrators.

Communicators are not members of the crisis management team and are not involved in regular crisis management team meetings. This is to avoid them knowing too much and accidentally disclosing important information to perpetrators. If the perpetrators demand to speak with someone other than the designated communicator, the organisation should ensure that the preferred communicator listens discreetly to the conversation.

Communicators may also be from outside the organisation. An intermediary can come forward from within the community, or one can be sought out by the organisation, proposed or approached by the authorities or even put forward by the perpetrators. It is not uncommon for locally respected and influential people to involve themselves in abduction resolution – elders have played an influential role in Somalia and Afghanistan, for example.

In a situation of high acceptance, and where the community retains a measure of influence over the perpetrators, a trustworthy individual from the local community may be able to secure the release of the abductee. It should be made clear, however, that they cannot make commitments on the organisation's behalf without its prior consent. In the face of well-organised criminals who are more autonomous from the community, traditional leaders may be ineffective. The question of trust is crucial. On whose behalf is the intermediary acting? Do they have connections with the perpetrators? Who controls the negotiations? There will also be a question of payment. Organisations may need to consider reimbursing some operating expenses for local intermediaries, for instance to cover travel, accommodation, food and communications. Such payment, however, may not be appropriate if the organisation is dealing with a person who, in local terms, is known to be relatively wealthy already.

The authorities may also put forward an official negotiator. The negotiator's first step will likely be to establish a climate for dialogue. Initially, the focus will probably be on minor issues on which agreement can be reached. This will establish a basis for discussion of more difficult issues. If the authorities provide the negotiator, there is a risk that considerations other than a concern for the safety and release of the abductee will come into play. Alternatively, a prestigious non-governmental entity may propose an envoy to try to mediate the release.

### Obtaining release by force

It is not uncommon for security forces to try to locate the abductee and attempt a rescue or to create a siege situation to force the perpetrators to surrender. This is a high-risk strategy for the abductee. There are several ways forced release scenarios can go wrong, with potentially fatal results.

From the organisation's point of view, two elements are particularly important.

- Do those carrying out the action have a clear overall command? If they do not, uncoordinated actions could imperil the life of the abductee.
- Do troops have a clear description of the abductee in order to be able to differentiate them from the perpetrators, and have they been given clear instructions only to fire on those firing at them? The abductee may be wearing the same kind of clothes as their perpetrators and can be harmed in the confusion of a siege.

In reality, the ability of the family or the organisation to influence the plans and actions of security forces may be limited. Authorities will respond as they see fit, and direct action by any authority is likely to be kept a secret for operational security reasons.

### Responding to sudden siege situations

Some siege situations may happen suddenly and be largely out of the organisation's control. An example includes the 2015 siege of the Radisson Blu hotel in Mali, where aid workers were among the hostages taken. While armed forces will lead the response to these situations, organisations can aim to:

- Quickly ascertain if any staff members have been affected by the incident.

- Implement measures to protect remaining staff, such as relocating them from the area.
- Mobilise crisis management teams to handle family liaison, manage media relations and coordinate with authorities.
- Be prepared to provide support to affected staff, including medical and psychological care, insurance payments and repatriation.
- Conduct an after-action review to assess the effectiveness of pre-incident security measures and the organisation's response, sharing the findings with relevant staff.

### 7.9.6 Managing the aftermath

An abduction may conclude with the release or death of the abductee – or, in some cases, remain unresolved indefinitely. Aid organisations need to be prepared to manage a range of possible outcomes.

#### Release

The return of released individuals needs to be properly organised and managed. During initial release, survivors should be received by someone they know, perhaps a close colleague. A female colleague would be best when the abductee is also female. As a priority, their immediate physical needs and comfort will need to be addressed.

If multiple staff from different organisations were involved in the abduction, then the situation might not be resolved for all stakeholders. If this is the case, extreme care needs to be taken with public statements until the incident is resolved for all parties.

Good practice considerations include:

- Attending to the needs of the survivor and their family members, both immediately and in the longer term.
- Informing and following up with relevant stakeholders, such as the media, other organisations and authorities, and managing their interactions with, and access to, the survivor.
- Debriefing the survivor when they are ready.
- Following up with individuals and groups who supported the response.

- Providing support, such as time off, for response team members.
- Deactivating the crisis management structure, including filing records and documents, and producing a final incident report that can be shared with internal and external stakeholders.

Abductions can be traumatic experiences. Survivors may need long-term help and access to professional support, especially during the initial phases. The organisation should take every possible measure to reduce the burden placed on survivors and allow them to recover.

It is good practice to bring survivors into decision-making directly affecting them – following a survivor-centred approach – but to do so progressively and in line with medical advice and the individual's own wishes.

► *For more details see Chapter 5.4 on staff care.*

### Unsuccessful resolution

An unsuccessful resolution may involve confirmed death with the body recovered, notification of death with no body recovered, or the case is unresolved (such as if no proof of life is obtained or there is no contact from perpetrators).

It is advisable for organisations to be prepared to provide long-term support to the family and other staff affected by the incident.

► *For more details on what this support might include, see Chapter 5.4 on staff care.*

In the event a body is recovered, an autopsy and investigation will likely be required either in the country where the incident took place or elsewhere. There may also be a formal coroner's enquiry (or inquest) in the abductee's home country. Organisations need to be prepared to cooperate with the authorities and share evidence.

The family may also question how the organisation handled the incident, initiate an inquiry and take legal action against it. In this case, the records the organisation kept as the incident unfolded will be an important source of evidence.

If things go wrong in an abduction managed by the authorities, the organisation may request an inquiry into how the operation was conducted and whether what went wrong could have been avoided.

### After-action reviews

After-action reviews focus on what happened and why: the decisions made, why they were made and what the outcomes were. An after-action review can include accountability elements but should not be an exercise in assigning blame. The review should aim to identify what actions can be taken to avoid similar incidents in the future, and how to manage them if they do occur.

It is important for an organisation to be transparent about its findings – especially with staff affected by the incident. The review can be disseminated through a session where key stakeholders, including the survivor, are invited to share lessons learned. Failure by the Norwegian Refugee Council to share information openly with affected staff was identified as a shortcoming during the court case following the abduction of staff members in Dadaab, Kenya, in 2012.

► For more details on after-action reviews see Chapter 4.4.

### Further information

#### Guidance and resources

**Buth, P.** (2010) *Crisis management of critical incidents*. EISF ([www.gisf.ngo/resource/crisis-management-of-critical-incident](http://www.gisf.ngo/resource/crisis-management-of-critical-incident)).

**Clamp, D.** (2022) *Ten years on: learning from the Steve Dennis case*. GISF ([www.gisf.ngo/blogs/ten-years-on-learning-from-the-steve-dennis-case/](http://www.gisf.ngo/blogs/ten-years-on-learning-from-the-steve-dennis-case/)).

**Davidson, S.** (2013) *Managing the message. Communication and media management in a security crisis*. EISF ([www.gisf.ngo/resource/managing-the-message](http://www.gisf.ngo/resource/managing-the-message)).

**EISF** (2017) *Abduction and kidnap risk management guide* ([www.gisf.ngo/resource/abduction-and-kidnap-risk-management-guide/](http://www.gisf.ngo/resource/abduction-and-kidnap-risk-management-guide/)).

**Hostage International** (n.d.a) *How we can help* ([www.hostageinternational.org/how-we-can-help/](http://www.hostageinternational.org/how-we-can-help/)).

**Hostage US** (2022) *A life after captivity. Reintegration guide* ([www.gisf.ngo/resource/a-life-after-captivity/](http://www.gisf.ngo/resource/a-life-after-captivity/)).

**Hostage US** (n.d.) *Hostage US guides* (<https://hostageus.org/resources/hostage-us-guides>).

**Merkelbach, M. and Kemp, E.** (2016) *Duty of care: a review of the Dennis v Norwegian Refugee Council ruling and its implications*. EISF ([www.gisf.ngo/resource/review-of-the-dennis-v-norwegian-refugee-council-ruling/](http://www.gisf.ngo/resource/review-of-the-dennis-v-norwegian-refugee-council-ruling/)).