

# When the job puts your life on the line

The corporate assault on emerging markets can put staff in danger. **Emily Ford** learns the tricks of staying safe

**K**idnapped, bundled blindfolded into the back of a car at gunpoint, in a country far from home — it is only natural that the victim in such circumstances would be a little emotional. But Duncan Bullivant, the chief executive of Henderson Risk, a risk management company, advises trying to remain neutral. "You are in the middle of a transaction," he says. "It's hard to look at it that way, but that's what it is."

As the case of Peter Moore, the IT consultant released last week after being held hostage in Iraq for two and a half years demonstrated, it is not only high-profile political targets or VIPs worth millions who are at risk of being abducted, but ordinary executives.

Many companies eager to move into emerging markets send employees into hostile environments, from oil and gas companies exploring the Niger Delta to retail banks setting up in Kosovo. Threats can change almost daily: while the security situation in Colombia has improved dramatically, Venezuela is increasingly unstable, Mr Bullivant says. Meanwhile, the growing telecoms industry in North Africa is having to deal with heightened terrorist activity.

A burgeoning corporate security industry is springing up to meet the demand. Revenues at Track24, a company that provides high-tech panic alarms and satellite tracking devices for corporate executives, governments and NGOs working in hostile environments, have risen steadily over the past six years.

Tim Grant, chief executive of Track24, says: "Companies are globalising, looking for contracts in new places that are often either unfamiliar or there is an element of threat. As an



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As a growing number of companies send staff into hostile regions, a corporate security industry has sprung up

executive, you are an obvious target."

His clients have encountered extortion, abduction and low level criminality such as theft, a big issue in emerging economies. While companies understand the risks, they often do not know how to deal with them, Mr Grant says. "They hand out a mobile phone and say 'call in once a day'." This can prove problematic. Often no one realises that an employee is missing until he or she fails to turn up at the embassy the next day.

Kidnapping for ransom is more predictable than many think, Mr Bullivant says. Most cases follow a natural pattern: a demand followed by an offer, then negotiation. "We try to glean as much information as possible to gauge what is motivating the opposition and where they will settle," Mr Bullivant says. Ultimately, whether to

pay up is the company's decision. "We are careful not to offer false hope," he says.

Yet potentially disastrous events can often start out more innocuously. Mr Grant tells of one employee whose car broke down after he took a wrong turn in the Democratic Republic of

## 'If there is an element of threat an executive is an obvious target'

Congo. No one passed for four days; without food or water, he nearly died.

Track24 has dealt with more than 1,000 "incidents"; Henderson Risk is "rarely not involved" in one. Yet these events are rarely heard about: companies are reluctant to discuss incidents

because of the risk to their reputations: any loss or harm to an executive is a PR disaster. One large US corporation will say only that recently an employee was held in a facility in Argentina that was taken over by a local "group", but got out safely.

The Central Executive Network trains corporate executives on how to stay safe in a hostile environment. Its operations director, a former bodyguard to Nelson Mandela who asks not to be named, says that training includes everything from how to deal with vehicle checkpoints, ("official and unofficial") to reacting in an ambush and how to make a weapon safe. In the Niger Delta, executives are abducted on a monthly basis, he says. "If you can escape it will be in the initial attack when everything is chaotic. Later, it becomes more difficult," he

says. Terrorism remains a constant threat for companies involved in the reconstruction effort in Iraq. Garth Whitty, who worked with an engineering company there until recently, says that simple actions such as changing patterns on a daily commute are critical. "If you do the same route at the same time every day, then if someone wants to attack you they will."

Guns and bodyguards are no substitute for understanding the local environment when working in dangerous regions, according to Jane Cocking, the humanitarian director for Oxfam. Ms Cocking says that NGOs have become "more intelligent" about security in the past two decades. Working for NGOs in Somalia and Sierra Leone in the Nineties, she negotiated in houses surrounded by gunmen and says that charities relied heavily on armed guards for protection.

While Oxfam's aid workers now carry a high frequency radio and satellite phones, having local contacts and being tuned in to the political situation is often more valuable, Ms Cocking says. "In conflict areas, control of neighbourhood can switch between different militia groups in a day."

Mr Bullivant says that security companies emphasise the importance of working with local communities and ensuring that their work does not exacerbate tense situations. Cases of maritime piracy in Somalia doubled between 2003 and 2009 and remain a real concern in the area — but the situation arose from the collapse of the fishing industry that caused thousands to lose their livelihoods.

So Mr Bullivant has an important message for companies working in sensitive areas: employing local people and finding ways to give back to the community is not simply an exercise in corporate social responsibility — it can also be a lifesaver.

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