INCIDENT REPORT: PHILIPPINES

Kidnapping of Swiss and Dutch National in Tawi-Tawi
1 February 2012

A Swiss and Dutch National were kidnapped along with their Filipino guide on 1 February 2012 off Barangay (village) Parangan, Panglima Sugala in Tawi-Tawi. The victims were identified as Ewold Horn, Lorenzo Vinciguerra, and Ivan Sarenas.\(^1\) The victims just finished a 14-day bird-watching trip at the time of their abduction.\(^2\) Five armed men intercepted the boat they were riding in on their way back to Bongao.\(^3\) There were three other men travelling with the victims- a policeman, a local town councilor, and the boat skipper- but they were ordered by the kidnappers to jump off the boat.\(^4\) The victims were transferred to another boat which was assumed to be headed towards the direction of Jolo, a known stronghold of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

The tour guide, Sarenas, managed to escape from their captors by jumping off the boat- he was rescued by some fisherman and brought inland to Languyan town where they reported the kidnapping to the police.

The Perpetrators

The five gunmen were reported to be armed with rifles, pistols and a grenade launcher at the time of the abduction.\(^5\) The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) has not been tagged as the ones behind the kidnapping. The ASG is not widely active in Tawi-Tawi- most of its operations are concentrated in Sulu and Basilan.

The kidnappers have not yet contacted the authorities and have yet to make a ransom demand.\(^6\)


\(^2\) “Gunmen abduct Swiss, Dutch nationals in southern Philippines,” Reuters, 1 February 2012, [http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/01/us-philippines-kidnapping-idUSTRE8100WU20120201](http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/01/us-philippines-kidnapping-idUSTRE8100WU20120201)


\(^4\) “Gunmen abduct Swiss, Dutch nationals in southern Philippines,” Reuters, 1 February 2012, [http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/01/us-philippines-kidnapping-idUSTRE8100WU20120201](http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/01/us-philippines-kidnapping-idUSTRE8100WU20120201)

\(^5\) Ibid

\(^6\) “Philippines says no ransom demand yet for 2 Europeans, kidnappers not likely to be militants,” Washington Post, 3 February 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/philippine-police-say-gunmen-holding-european-tourists-likely-from-local-group-not-abu-sayyaf/2012/02/03/gIQAHgpcmQ_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/philippine-police-say-gunmen-holding-european-tourists-likely-from-local-group-not-abu-sayyaf/2012/02/03/gIQAHgpcmQ_story.html); See also “Philippines say no ransom demand yet for two Europeans, kidnappers not likely to be militants,” Washington Post, 3 February 2012,
Security Response

A massive search and rescue operation was mobilized by the military in Tawi-Tawi and the nearby islands. Naval troops and Marines were deployed for the rescue of the hostages. The search and rescue operations are concentrated along the swamp areas, mangroves, and vast seas surrounding Tawi-Tawi which consists of more than 300 small islands that border Malaysia.

Security officials are confident that the kidnappers have not managed to slip past the naval blockade around Tawi-Tawi. Police denied reports that the victims have been brought to Sulu province - a known stronghold of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). The Provincial Police Director of Tawi-Tawi, Senior Superintendent Rodelio Jocson, was quoted in a news report saying that a local gang is holding Horn and Vinciguerre- “they were abducted by locals and not the Abu Sayyaf.”

Analysis

There is a perception that the kidnapping could have been prevented had the tour guide and the foreign victims coordinated with security officials with regards to their trip. Since last year, the embassies of the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia have issued travel warnings for their citizens not to travel to Sulu, Basilan, Tawi-Tawi and the Zamboanga Peninsula, as there have been incidents of the kidnapping of foreign nationals in these areas.

It was first assumed that the kidnappers were headed towards Jolo but the boat used by the kidnappers was recovered by authorities in the town of Langyuan, Tawi-Tawi. It was noted that the boat used by the kidnappers was small and did not have any extra fuel

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9 Ibid
11 Ibid
12 Ibid
to make the 12 hour trip to Jolo. Police also recovered the boat from which the victims were seized and they recovered Vinciguerra’s bag which had more than USD1,000 worth of foreign currencies and Sarenas’ bag which contained expensive cameras.14

Authorities took note of the fact that three other potential hostages— a policeman, a town councilor and the boat skipper, were freed by the kidnappers. They also did not shoot Sarenas when he jumped out of the boat, dived into the water and escaped. If the ASG were the ones involved in the kidnapping, it is uncharacteristic of them to let these things pass as they are notorious for their brutality and heavy-handedness with their victims.

It is understandable that the authorities could not entirely rule out the involvement of the ASG. Kidnapping is a known tactic of the ASG and foreign nationals are often sought out as they command a higher ransom. To date, the ASG has one Malaysian, one Indian, one Japanese national, and an Australian national in their custody.

It must be stressed though that the ASG is not the only armed group in the area. Local organized crime groups/armed groups that operate in the area could be the ones involved in the kidnapping. There is the possibility that the hostages could be “turned over” to the ASG for a fee.

The events related to this kidnapping have yet to fully unfold and the analysis of this incident is a work in progress.