

Hoax and Virtual Kidnappings

Practical simple steps to understanding and managing this increasing risk

Hoax kidnappings and what we call Virtual Kidnappings are not a new aspect of the kidnapping trade; however, they are becoming more and more problematic. During 2013 the number of such incidents in Nigeria has increased to significantly alarming levels on previous years with parts of Pakistan, India, Kenya, Ghana, South Africa and Venezuela also seeing upward trends specifically related to this type of incident.

Hoax kidnappings originating from Nigeria and Ghana are becoming ever more sophisticated and elaborate and in recent years the number of primarily men we have assisted with these hoaxes is alarming.

In most cases men are engaged through online chat rooms and carefully groomed and lured to commencing an online friendship with a young attractive woman. The relationship generally evolves, photographs are exchanged and elaborate profiles about the women are used to convince the men they are in love and about to have a life together. They use false profiles, social media platforms, photographs, documents, addresses in the UK and Europe, job positions and even false phone numbers diverted to mobiles in Nigeria to carefully cement the relationship. When the man is totally convinced, the woman often needs to fly to Nigeria or another part of Africa on business, or to see a friend or relative, before pretending to be flying onto wherever their new online lover resides (usually Europe, Australia or America).

Whilst in the African country their kidnapping is falsified, ransoms are demanded along with regular payments for food, health, hygiene and or sanitary products. All too often payments are made the men desperate to assist the new love of their life. This whole hoax is very convincing and elaborate, normally undertaken by organised gangs/teams of men and women in Nigeria or Ghana ending in serious psychological trauma once our teams quickly establish that the clients online lover does not exist, the photos are of some innocent person found online and the lady on the phone they have been speaking with intimately is in fact a criminal. In some cases where clients had not sourced specialist support or at the most had involved an investigator, they had often parted with often thousands of Dollars or Pounds.

With Virtual kidnappings, a victim travelling is targeted; information obtained from social media sites or other online conduits, pick pocketing, theft of luggage or hotel staff and used to obtain travel itineraries and company names or family contacts. When the victim next boards a long haul flight and will be un-contactable for several hours a call is placed to the family or business demanding a sum of money within a few hours to prevent a fatality and claiming a kidnapping.

In panic, many pay the money quickly when no kidnap had ever been undertaken and their loved one or employee was enjoying the in flight entertainment at 30,000 ft.

So what can you do to prevent this happening to you, your staff or family member: Below are a few practical steps to mitigating these risks and managing such incidents

Carefully examine and adopt whatever measures best suit your situation and any incident that may occur:

- ✓ Always maintain good information security
- ✓ Be very careful what you put online, social media forums, etc and never trust anyone online without quality off line verification
- ✓ Password protect phones, tablets and laptops with quality encrypted passwords
- ✓ Consider the use of encrypted and password protected USB devices for travel personal/travel information and the use of a USB key as an additional password for laptops
- ✓ Always ensure travel arrangements and itineraries are secure and arranged by trusted people
- ✓ Keep luggage, wallets, bags secure on your person where possible, locked, chained and secure
- ✓ Keep all luggage and personal information secure when in hotels and bars
- ✓ Be careful what information you give hotel and other staff whilst overseas
- ✓ Don't use insecure areas of communication such as airport/hotel wifi, or hotel phones, etc
- ✓ If you need to be tweeting whilst overseas consider adding a different location using a web app like pleasedontstalkme.com
- ✓ Be aware of these types of kidnap risks and the countries they generally occur within
- ✓ Understand how these incidents occur and unfold, and seek professional briefings for staff or family
- ✓ Have an action on or contingency plan for if an incident occurs and involve professionals as part of any plan
- ✓ Never pay any monies, demands or ransoms without seeking specialist advice
- ✓ Keep a low profile when overseas whenever you can
- ✓ Never enter into any relationship online where you need to disclose any information or may form any sort of emotional relationship without careful in person verification
[in some elaborate cases gangs have even had false women visit men to cement the relationship if they felt the return would be worth the expense]
- ✓ Try to phone employees or loved ones just before flying, from within the air side secure areas so they know your safe and can detect any hoax
- ✓ Only verify the boarding of a flight or whereabouts of someone from a number or source you obtain independently yourself
- ✓ Be highly aware of elaborate and very convincing hoaxes and cons via online forums, email, SMS and similar
- ✓ Be highly aware of claims made about an employee or loved one in accidents, illness, kidnapped and verify the facts independently or seek specialist advice before engaging in further communications or the payments of any funds
- ✓ Ensure staff travelling, families and employees are appropriately trained and prepared for both overseas travel and or receiving a kidnap ransom demand or having to respond to the early stages of such an incident or claim
- ✓ Ensure awareness training, travel briefings, policy and procedures and contingency plans are undertaken by industry professionals
- ✓ Always keep such training and preparedness confidential
- ✓ Review and test all your plans and procedures at regular intervals
- ✓ If your loved one is still allowed to speak with you daily on her mobile phone, but claims she is held hostage in the jungle, crying and suffering, seek professional advice
- ✓ If you have any concerns at any point seek professional advice

At The Cavell Group we see all too often the impact of such incidents real and hoax and charge no fee for initial strategic advice.

Please seek further advice before travelling or responding to such incidents