

Advisory: Niger Hostage Rescue

On Saturday 31 October, Nigerien Defence Minister Issoufou Katambe confirmed the release of American missionary Philip Walton, who was kidnapped near the Nigerian border earlier this month.

The Pentagon has also confirmed that US Special Operations Forces on Saturday rescued an American citizen who had been taken hostage by armed men earlier in the week and held in northern Nigeria. In a statement, Pentagon spokesman Jonathan Hoffman disclosed that “US forces conducted a hostage rescue operation during the early

hours of 31 October in northern Nigeria to recover an American citizen held hostage by a group of armed men. This American



citizen is safe and is now in the care of the US Department of State. No US military personnel were injured during the operation,” adding “we appreciate the support of our international partners in conducting this operation. The United States will continue to protect our people and our interests anywhere in the world.” A US official with knowledge of the operation has confirmed that the mission, which lasted several hours, was carried out by the Navy’s elite SEAL Team 6, who were flown to the region by Air Force special operations. The official reported that the US forces who carried out the mission killed six of the seven captors. The operation involved the US, Nigerien and Nigerian governments, who worked closely to rescue Walton. The CIA provided intelligence leading to Walton’s whereabouts while Marine Special Operations elements in Africa aided in locating him. The elite SEAL Team 6 then carried out the “precision” hostage rescue mission.

Philip Walton, 27, was kidnapped by gunmen on Tuesday 27 October from his residence near the Tahoua region town of Birnin Konni, near the border with Nigeria. The governor of the local region where the abduction occurred was quoted in various local media stating that six men on motorbikes armed with AK-47s came to the man’s property in the village of Massalata, located around 5 km (3 miles) from the border with Nigeria. The governor, Abdourahamane Moussa, disclosed that after demanding money, the men took the American citizen with them in the direction of the Nigerian border. Police reported at the time that Walton’s wife, young daughter and brother were left behind in their home in the village.

The US believes that Walton’s captors had no known affiliation with any terrorist organization operating in the region and were most likely bandits seeking money. However there were growing concerns that he could potentially be sold to a terrorist group. A counter-terrorism official briefed on the hostage recovery operation has disclosed that concern rose quickly after the kidnapping in regards to an opportunity to rescue Walton, nothing that any such operation would become dangerous if he was taken by or sold to a group of Islamist militants aligned with either al-Qaeda or the Islamic State (IS) group. American special operations commanders consequently felt that they needed to act swiftly to avoid this scenario.

This latest kidnapping incident in the Sahel region comes after four foreign hostages were released in northern Mali in early October. Another American, Christian humanitarian aid worker Jeffery Rey Woodke, 60, has been held hostage since October 2016 after being kidnapped by armed militants in northern Niger. His current

whereabouts remain unknown, though officials say that they believe he is likely being held by IS in neighbouring Mali. In May this year, his family pleaded with his captives for his release, stating that his age and the current COVID-19 pandemic were further threatening his safety. Both US and Nigerian officials say that they believe Woodke is alive.

CONTEXT

In recent years, Niger has experienced a rise in militant activity, including terrorist attacks and kidnappings. The 27 October kidnapping of Philip Walton however occurred in the southern region of the country, hundreds of kilometres from the restive Diffa and Tillabéri regions, which over the past few years have been significantly impacted by jihadist activity - the Diffa region being affected by the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency in neighbouring Nigeria, and the Tillabéri region, which has witnessed the spill over of violence from neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso greatly impact the local communities. This latest kidnapping incident underlines the growing threat emanating from both jihadist and criminal groups that operate across the country and further highlights the growing threat to foreigners living and working in the region.

TRAVEL ADVISORY

In light of the kidnapping incident anyone currently in the Birnin Konni area of Niger is advised to monitor developments, maintain a heightened level of vigilance and review their security arrangements. You should also heed to any directives issued by the local authorities.

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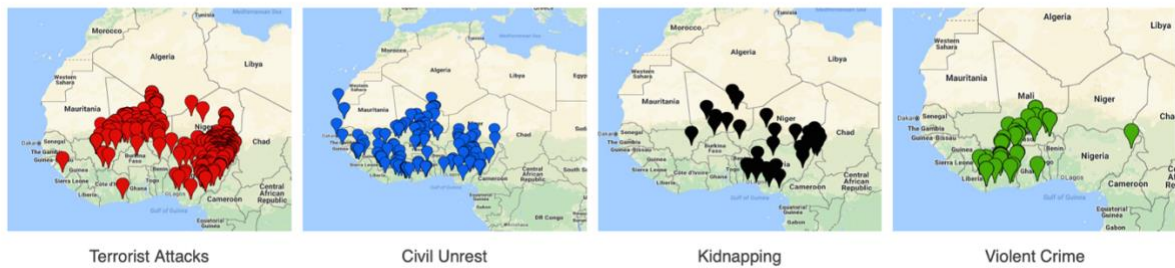
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