



SPECIAL ADVISORY

AQIM Threat to Missionaries and Faith-Based Workers in Mali

July 3, 2017

SUMMARY:

1. CCI assesses a significantly increased threat of kidnapping and other terrorist attacks against missionaries and faith-based workers in Mali from AQIM.
2. CCI believes that this threat is especially acute in and around Koutiala.
3. CCI recommends that agencies with expatriate personnel in the Koutiala area give immediate consideration to withdrawing those personnel, at least temporarily.
4. CCI recommends that agencies with expatriate personnel in Mali conduct an immediate evaluation of their current security capacity and give careful consideration to enhanced security measures.

BACKGROUND:

Over the past several years there has been a pattern of increased terrorist activity targeting western interests and expatriates throughout West Africa. This pattern has been especially acute in Mali and has included attacks on MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in Mali), attacks on Malian military posts and forces, and cross-border attacks; four attacks on hotels/resorts catering to expatriates and at least seven kidnappings of expatriates from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. CCI assumes most readers of this Advisory are familiar with this pattern, but if not, suggests review of the reports “AQIM Merger in Mali Poses Threat to Sahel Region” (OSAC; June 2, 2017) and “AQIM’s Alliance in Mali: Prospects for Jihadist Preeminence in West Africa” (The Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor Vol. 15, Issue 8; April 21, 2017).

The most recent development, and the one of most concern to CCI, is the July 1, 2017 AQIM release of a 16’ 50” video titled “The Correct Equation” via Telegram. The video

purports to have been produced by “al-Ezza Media Foundation”, a media arm of AQIM. The video includes images of 6 expatriate hostages known to be held in the region, claims that J.N.I.M (Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen) is holding the hostages, and offers explanation for the kidnapping of 3 of the 6 hostages (all referred to as missionaries). The video references a 7th hostage released a week ago¹.

In CCI’s assessment of the video, we note that the narrator divides the 6 hostages profiled into two groups: McGowan, Elliot and Ghergut; and Stockly, Narvaez and Petronin. The first group are featured first in the video and the narrator offers only a very generic explanation for their capture and detention (“Many do not understand why the mujahideen captured non-combatants. However, we as Muslims are obliged to keep to the Shariah and not to international laws set by the kuffar”, and, “And as the kuffar continue to imprison Muslims unjustly around the world, based on this, we subsequently imprison their people as a reaction to their aggression against the Muslims.”).

However, the narrator offers far more justification for the capture and detention of the second group, painting them first as “Crusaders (sent as) missionaries to try and convert Muslims to Christianity”. This statement is followed by a video insert of US missionaries involved in work in Koutiala, Mali. The narrator then says. “These Christian preachers take advantage of the impoverished situation in Mali to try and achieve their evil goals. And from among these Christian missionaries working in Mali are Beatrice Stockly, Sophie Petronin, and Gloria Cecilia Narváez. These three Christian preachers worked in Mali, calling to their falsehood (sic) using deceptive techniques and taking advantage of the weak and poor.”

The narrator then discusses each of these three “missionary” cases:

- “She (Stockly) had agreed never to return preaching her false beliefs as a condition for her release, but she broke this agreement and returned preaching again in this Islamic town, claiming to be a messenger from God.”
- “Gloria Cecilia Narváez was sent by her congregation to Mali to support and aid the Crusaders by preaching Christianity and to convert Muslims to her religion. She and her congregation want nothing more than to strip the Muslims of Mali of their beliefs and replace them with falsehood.”
- “Sophie Petronin is a 72 year old French NGO who worked in Gao disguised as a humanitarian worker. She brought with her her Western ideologies, plaguing the Muslims of Mali with her corrupt French beliefs.”

CCI notes with concern that this video places the most emphasis on what it describes as the “missionary” hostages, includes video clips of expatriate missionary activity in Koutiala, and by strong inference suggests that they were kidnapped because they are missionaries. It is important to note that CCI has no evidence to suggest that any of these kidnappings were part of a coordinated effort to seek and capture expatriate Christian missionaries. In fact, there is some indication in some of the cases that the kidnappings themselves may have been opportunistic, committed by local criminal groups and then the hostages were sold to AQIM. However, we have long been concerned that AQIM would, at some point, decide to

¹ The video does not mention an 8th hostage, an American missionary kidnapped in Niger in October 2016. CCI is deeply involved in that case and believes that the omission of reference to this hostage is explained by information that needs to be kept confidential, but does not impact this Assessment.

leverage their detention of a group of expatriate faith-based workers, and now that seems to have happened.

To summarize, we are very concerned that:

1. AQIM is holding a group of expatriate missionary hostages
2. AQIM has now announced/claimed that group of detentions and justified them as being due to their missionary activity
3. AQIM has directed special attention towards Koutiala, a site of significant missions activity and outside the generally considered “normal” area of operations for AQIM
4. AQIM included clips obtained externally² showing missions activity in Koutiala and about missionaries in Koutiala in this recent video release

We assess all of this as a strong indicator that AQIM is now targeting expatriate missionaries in Mali, with special attention and threat to those in the Koutiala area, and will continue to do so.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. CCI recommends that agencies with expatriate personnel in the Koutiala area give immediate consideration to withdrawing those personnel, at least temporarily.
2. CCI recommends that the sending of short-term work and ministry teams to Mali (teams consisting of individuals without significant overseas experience and knowledge of culture/context/environment in West Africa) be suspended.
3. CCI recommends that agencies with expatriate personnel in Mali conduct an immediate evaluation of their current security capacity and give careful consideration to enhanced security measures, including (at least)³:
 - a. Review of existing policies, procedures and training to insure consistency with this increased threat environment
 - b. Briefings, discussions and training with in-country staff to insure that organizational policies and procedures related to security are understood and followed
 - c. Regular collection, assessment and sharing of security threat information with and among all trusted stakeholders, including the US and other western embassies
 - d. Review, repair, and upgrade (as necessary) of all physical security features at all facilities

Although CCI does not routinely re-issue government recommendations, we do note that the US Embassy in Bamako issued this statement today:

² These clips appear to have been obtained from the websites of US churches and the websites or blogs of expatriates who have served in Mali.

³ Readers can request CCI's Resource "Security Options in Deteriorating Environments Or Situations Of Increased Risk" by emailing info@cricon.org.

*The video released on July 1 by the newly-formed terrorist group Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM or "Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims") confirms in the clearest terms yet that missionaries and people working for faith-based organizations are being targeted in Mali. The use of images of U.S.-based missionary organizations from public sources indicate that the terrorist group is aware of the presence of a sizable missionary community in Koutiala, and perhaps other locations in Mali. We believe that the missionary community in Koutiala, in particular, is **NOT SAFE**. (emphasis in original)*

We believe this Embassy assessment is accurate.

In closing, we will mention that CCI very rarely recommends withdrawal of personnel or restrictions on sending personnel. We are cognizant of the impact on ministry and on local relationships in these circumstances. So, these recommendations are reserved for the most urgent situations only.

Readers of this Advisory with additional information, concerns or questions are encouraged to contact the author, Robert Klamser, directly by email at rklamser@cricon.org.

CCI stands ready to support Christian agencies in the response to this increased threat, to conduct site-specific assessments, to provide training and to assist agencies in their assessment of and response to this situation; and to discuss specific issues and situations.

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