



Global Insights Report

Your reliable source of intelligence for Kidnap,
Ransom, Extortion and Piracy around the world

Venezuela, Iraq, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Africa

March 2023

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The Americas

Mexico and Latin America



Global Insights Report

March 2023

Venezuela

40.4 Homicide rate per 100,000

The homicide rate in Venezuela reached 40.4 per 100,000 citizens in 2022

Source: Statista

15,770 Arbitrary Arrests

Venezuelan security forces arbitrarily arrested and detained over 15,770 people [January 2014 – June 2022]

Source: Human Rights Watch

UK All Travel

The United Kingdom Government issued an advisory against 'all travel' to:
within 80 km (50 miles) of the Colombian border
within 40 km (25 miles) of the Brazilian border
Zulia State

The United Kingdom Government issued an advisory against 'all but essential travel' to the rest of Venezuela

US Level 4: Do Not Travel

The United States Government classified Venezuela as 'Level 4: Do Not Travel'





The Americas

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Venezuela

Violent crime continues relatively unabated throughout Venezuela in 2023. In recent years a new type of criminal group has emerged, called ‘megabandas’. These large criminal organizations each typically have over 50 members. According to research organization SRM, Venezuela is home to an estimated 40–50 megabandas. Originating in Venezuela’s violent prison system, these groups are responsible for many of the homicides, kidnappings, extortions, and drug trafficking that plague the country. Since early 2022, President Nicolás Maduro has directed police and military forces to conduct ‘mega-operations’ against numerous megabandas in an attempt to curb the violence. Ironically many of these operations were extremely violent themselves, and caught a number of innocent bystanders in the crossfire. Despite many members having been killed or arrested, many of the operations have had unintended consequences. Instead of curbing violence, kidnappings, and extortions, the targeted megabandas have only splintered into smaller groups.





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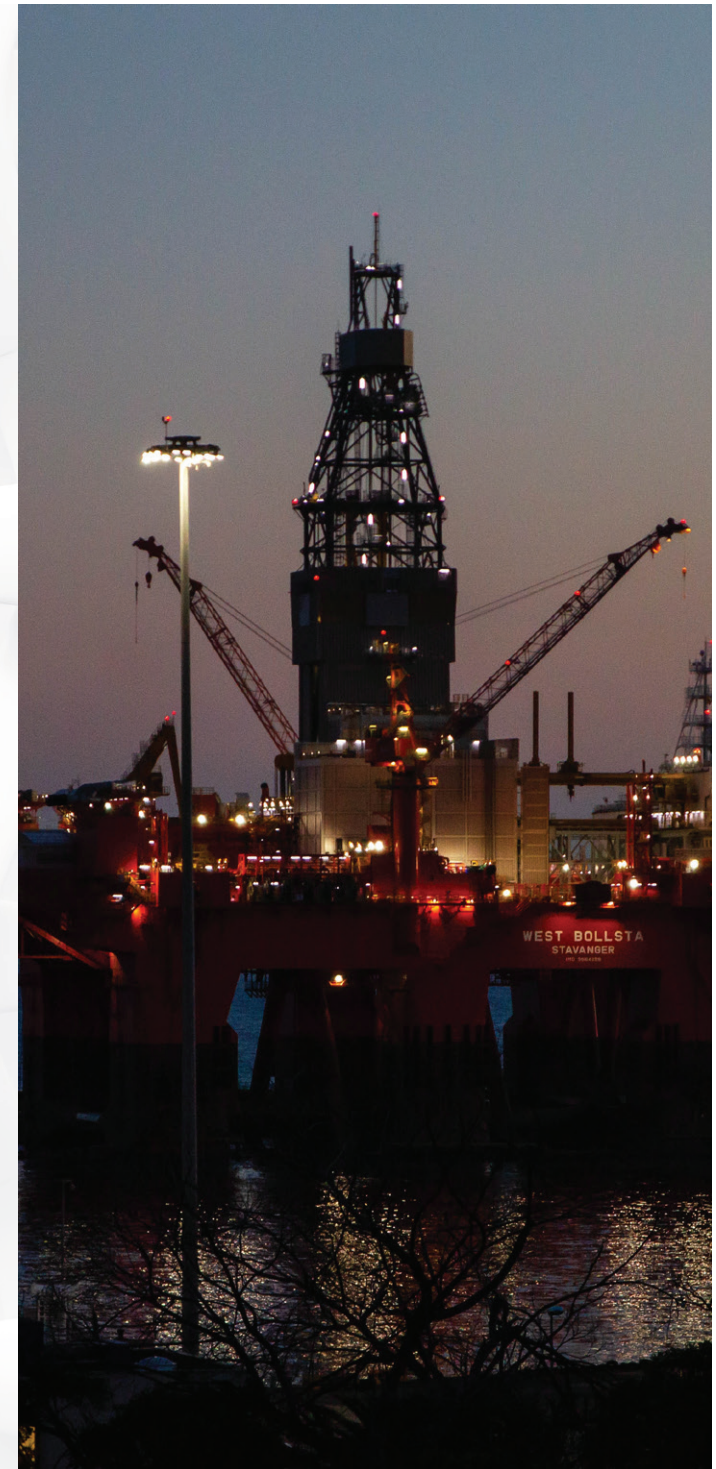
Venezuela

Research site Statista reported that the homicide rate in Venezuela stayed virtually unchanged in 2022 year-on-year, with approximately 40.4 deaths per 100,000 people. This is significantly lower than five years ago, but remains one of the highest homicide rates per capita in the world. The NGO Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia (Venezuelan Violence Observatory) recorded the following violent deaths in January 2023 alone:

- 18 in Carabobo state
- 10 in Guárico state (three of which were attributed to violence by the police)
- 4 in Falcón state

In the absence of reliable statistics, anecdotal evidence indicates kidnappings – both express and for ransom – continue to plague Venezuela. People with access to foreign currencies are favored targets, making foreign nationals who are perceived to be wealthy particularly vulnerable.

The Venezuelan Government – through state and local security forces – continues to unlawfully detain both foreign nationals and local citizens. The NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that from January 2014 through to June 2022, security forces arbitrarily arrested and detained over 15,770 people. Some have been held for years without a trial or even formal charges being filed. The United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR) has received continuous reports of arbitrary arrests, detentions, and human rights violations perpetrated by security forces throughout 2022. In late 2022, Venezuela released seven United States citizens who had been held for years. The United States regards their charges as deceptive, and views the detentions as a form of political retribution. Foreign nationals traveling to Venezuela must be aware of the possibility of detention by the Venezuelan Government for political purposes.





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Iraq

420 Secret Detention Centre

There are an estimated 420 secret detention centres in Iraq
Source: UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances

3,000+ Reports of Torture

3,000+ reports of torture reported to The Iraqi Government [February 2023]

Source: Strategic Centre for Human Rights in Iraq

UK All Travel

The United Kingdom Government issued an advisory 'against all travel' to all provinces of Iraq. This excludes the Kurdistan Region, which citizens are advised 'against all but essential travel'

US Level 4: Do Not Travel

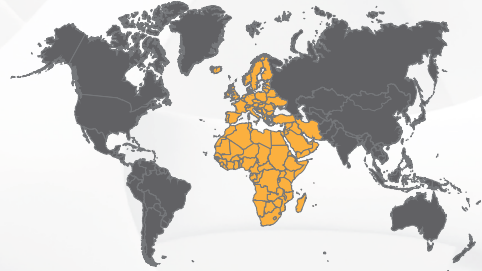
The United States Government classified Iraq as 'Level 4: Do Not Travel'





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Iraq

October 2022 saw Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani finally form a government in Iraq, bringing to an end a 12-month political deadlock. Despite this, political unrest over the dire economic conditions facing the general population has continued across the country. Iraq's internal stability also continues to be undermined by heavily armed Islamic terrorist groups who threaten frequent

attacks, kidnapping and extortion – all to fund future operations.

The current security situation within the country remains highly unpredictable, with burgeoning crime and human rights issues. Arbitrary detention and forced disappearances have long been practised by the nation's paramilitary militias and government forces. During February

2023, the head of Iraq's Strategic Centre for Human Rights reported that the government had received over 3,000 reports of torture, with many thousands more believed to be missing and detained in 420 secret detention centres across the country. These are reportedly linked to the various armed factions that comprise the Popular Mobilization Forces.





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Iraq

More than three years after its military defeat in Iraq, the Islamic State (ISIS) continues to recruit and mount attacks. This is supported by figures provided by the Iraqi Joint Operations Centre, which reported on 33 security operations conducted during February 2023, resulting in 17 ISIS fighters being killed and 14 detained (over 200 fighters were reportedly killed across Iraq in 2022). ISIS militants pose a number of security threats, none more draconian than the practice of torture and execution as an act of retribution. Militant groups throughout Iraq continue to engage in kidnapping, not just ideologically but also to finance their operations. With limited security coverage in the more rural and remote parts of the country, groups are kidnapping and holding the local population for ransom, and will also target staff of non-governmental organizations if the opportunity arises.

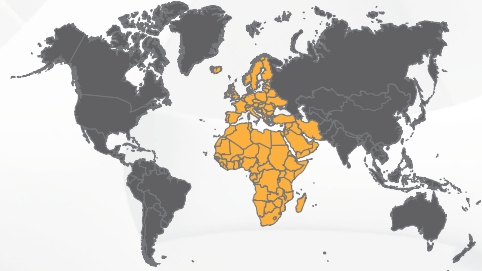
On 6 March 2023, five people were abducted by militants in Anbar Province in the west of the country (two of the five were killed in the process). In January 2023, militants linked to ISIS posted online footage of the execution of two civilians who had been abducted over 18 months ago in north-eastern Iraq. Unfortunately, this ruthless tactic is not limited to militant groups, and reports of kidnappings have extended to organised criminal gangs and opportunistic criminals throughout 2022 and into 2023. One gang is reported to be kidnapping foreign workers, and demanding ransom while torturing victims during live video calls to their families back in Bangladesh.





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Somalia

3009 Violent Conflicts

3,009 violent conflicts reported in Somalia over the last year
Source: ACLED - Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project

613 Civilian Fatalities

Terrorist operations – 94% attributed to Al-Shabaab – account for an estimated 613 civilian fatalities and 948 injuries [2022]
Source: United Nations

\$10m Al-Shabaab Monthly Revenue

Al-Shabaab currently has 15,000 - 18,000 fighters, and a monthly revenue of USD 10 million
Source: BBC

UK All Travel

The United Kingdom Government issued an advisory 'against all travel' to Somalia, excluding three western regions of Somaliland which citizens are advised 'against all but essential travel', including:

- Awdal (including Boorama)
- Maroodijeh (including Hargeisa)
- Sahil (including Berbera)

US Level 4: Do Not Travel

The United States Government classified Somalia as 'Level 4: Do Not Travel'





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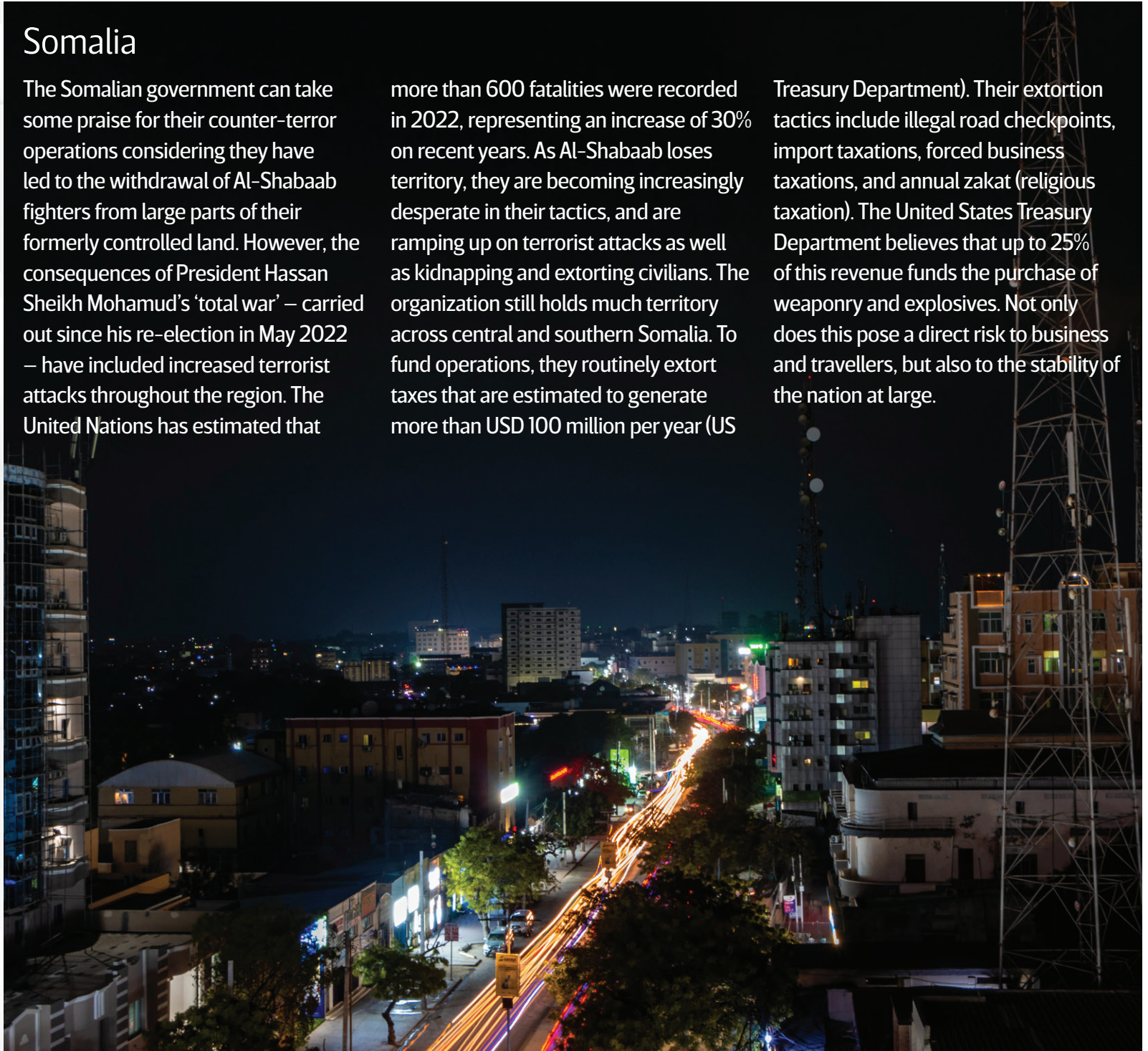


Somalia

The Somali government can take some praise for their counter-terror operations considering they have led to the withdrawal of Al-Shabaab fighters from large parts of their formerly controlled land. However, the consequences of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's 'total war' – carried out since his re-election in May 2022 – have included increased terrorist attacks throughout the region. The United Nations has estimated that

more than 600 fatalities were recorded in 2022, representing an increase of 30% on recent years. As Al-Shabaab loses territory, they are becoming increasingly desperate in their tactics, and are ramping up on terrorist attacks as well as kidnapping and extorting civilians. The organization still holds much territory across central and southern Somalia. To fund operations, they routinely extort taxes that are estimated to generate more than USD 100 million per year (US

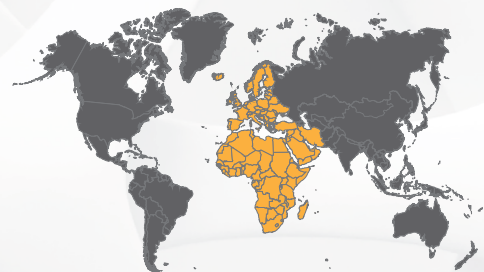
Treasury Department). Their extortion tactics include illegal road checkpoints, import taxations, forced business taxations, and annual zakat (religious taxation). The United States Treasury Department believes that up to 25% of this revenue funds the purchase of weaponry and explosives. Not only does this pose a direct risk to business and travellers, but also to the stability of the nation at large.





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Somalia

Despite the government's best efforts and some notable battlefield victories, Al-Shabaab still operates at a scale that severely undermines the nation's security and stability. In southern and central regions, their controlled territories are strongly correlated to those areas worst impacted by recent famine and drought, where 5.59 million people have been left in a state of acute food insecurity. And yet this terrorist organization – responsible for 94% of attacks in the nation – continues to extort starving citizens, forcing ever greater suffering. Throughout the nation the risk of kidnapping has long existed, and despite the decline of piracy and offshore kidnapping, much of their legacy remains. This was highlighted by the eventual release of 14 Iranian fishermen in late December who had been held captive for over eight years.

Al-Shabaab and other terrorist operations in the region still use kidnaping for geopolitical reasons and to force ransom payments. Due to territorial control, organizations can hold captives for extended periods of time with relative impunity due to the state's incapacity to respond. While recent years have seen few new cases of Western kidnappings, as Al-Shabaab violence increases in response to declining territorial control, the threat remains a strong possibility.





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Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

5.8m 5.8+ million people have been displaced by violence in eastern DRC
Source: UNHCR – The United Nations Refugee Agency

120+ Armed Militias 120+ armed militias are active in eastern DRC
Source: Human Rights Watch

UK All Travel The United Kingdom Government issued an advisory 'against all travel' to:

- Provinces of Kasai Oriental, Haut-Uele, Haut Lomami, Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu, Maniema, and Tanganyika in eastern DRC
- Falling within 50km of the border with the Central African Republic and South Sudan
- The United Kingdom Government issued an advisory 'against all but essential travel' to:
- City of Bukavu in South Kivu Province
- Districts of N'djili and Kimbanseke in Kinshasa, south of the main access road to N'djili airport (located in Nsele district)
- Provinces of Kasai and Kasai Central
- Territory of Kwamouth (located in Mai-Ndombe Province)
- City of Goma in North Kivu Province

US Level 4: Do Not Travel The US Government classified the following areas with DRC as 'Level 4: Do Not Travel':

The United States Government classified the following areas with DRC as 'Level 4: Do Not Travel':

- North Kivu Province
- Ituri Province
- Eastern DRC region and the Three Kasai Provinces
- The United State Government classified the rest of DRC as 'Level 3: Reconsider Travel'





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Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Conversation about the security situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo has been dominated by the escalating violence in the restive eastern regions. Since fighting between Congolese forces and rebel groups – most notably M23 and the Uganda-based Allied Democratic Force (ADF) – first flared in late 2021, more than 5.8 million people in the Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu, and Tanganyika Provinces have been displaced. The violent conflict has only increased in recent months, attracting international

attention in February 2023 when rebel forces attacked a helicopter operated by United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), killing one peacekeeper, and severely injuring another.

Kidnappings – always a tool in the rebels' collective arsenal – are now rampant, and rebels have carried out numerous mass kidnappings as a means of inciting terror and generating revenue. In December

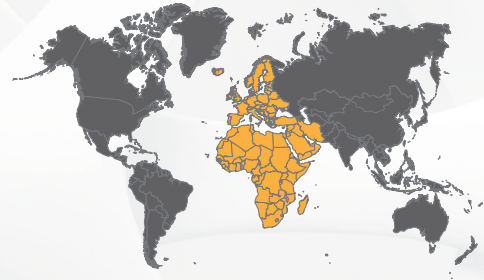
2022, the militia kidnapped over 50 residents who were suspected to be working with anti-M23 forces – some were tortured. To boot, children have been targeted for mass kidnappings. In January 2023, the rebels kidnapped 13 boys and girls during an attack on a village in the North Kivu Province. Despite the international outcry for their release, the fate of the children remains unknown at the time of writing this report.





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DRC

After a period of relative calm following a long legacy of violence from the Lord's Resistance Army, DRC's northern regions are once again experiencing an escalation in kidnappings. In early March 2023, 25 young locals – between 12 and 18 years old, including seven girls – were abducted from three villages in the Bas-Uele Province. Seven armed men in white military uniforms are reported to have conducted the kidnappings. Similarly, in late 2022 an international football player was kidnapped for ransom in Kinshasa by a group of people, some dressed in Congolese Police uniform. He was released after a ransom was paid. Whether the perpetrators were indeed from the military and police force is unknown. Corrupt Congolese government employees and security forces have been an issue in the past.

Express kidnappings are common in the capital Kinshasa and typically involve taxis, which visitors should avoid if possible.





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South Africa

1,100+ Kidnappings
a month 2022

An average of 1,100+ kidnappings a month were reported in the first half of 2022

Source: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime

4,124 Kidnappings
Oct-Dec 2022

4,124 kidnappings were reported from October to December 2022

Source: RSA Police

184,020 Contact
Crimes

184,020 contact crimes (crimes against a person) were reported from October to December 2022

Source: RSA Police

UK The United Kingdom Government does not have an official advisory regarding South Africa, but does note its high crime rate

US Level 2: Increased Caution The United States Government has classified South Africa as 'Level 2: Exercise Increased Caution'





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South Africa

Since 2016, kidnappings in South Africa have continued to escalate at an explosive rate throughout the country. The South African Police recording 8,000+ cases in a six-month period from July – December 2022. According to police, South Africa’s Gauteng Province has the highest number of kidnappings (1,974 reported from October – December 2022), followed by Kwazulu-Natal Province (917 reported during the same three-month period).

Kidnappings were initially a secondary crime – a by-product of robberies and carjackings. That changed as criminal organizations realised that kidnapping for ransom is a reliable and lucrative revenue stream. According to anti-crime activist and journalist Yusuf Abramjee, typical initial ransom demands by kidnapers range from ZAR 50,000 (approximately USD 2,800) to ZAR 500,000 (approximately USD 27,500). Other reports however indicate that initial demands have grown into the millions, and occasionally even millions of USD.

As the number of kidnappings continues to rise, the type of targeted victim has increased too. Locals, foreign nationals, wealthy families, as well as poverty-stricken residents now all find themselves as targets.





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South Africa

In a troubling turn, children have increasingly become favored targets, particularly those of successful businesspeople and wealthy families. Over the past couple of years, many children have been abducted in coordinated attacks. These were undertaken with such precision that they were clearly well-organised, and much time was spent studying and tracking victims to establish what the family would be able to pay. In one notable case, four children of one South African businessman were kidnapped at the same time and held for three weeks. Although the exact number of children kidnapped is unknown, the issue has become so prevalent that there have been calls for the South African Police to include the figure in their quarterly crime statistics.

In addition to kidnapping, reports of other violent crimes are also on the increase. In their third quarter's crime statistics, spanning the months of October – December 2022, South African Police reported increases in:

- Murders (7,555)
- Attempted murders (7,016)
- Sexual offences (15,545)
- Aggravated assaults (50,582)
- Aggravated robberies (37,829)

The reasons behind the surge in violent crime are predictably varied and complicated. Contributing factors include high unemployment, high poverty rates, police understaffing and undertraining, as well as corruption. Despite the government's efforts to address these issues, there appears to be no relief for the foreseeable future.





Propriety Information

The material provided in this report is based on the information made available at the time of writing and the conditions then in existence through open-source reporting and SPS proprietary human sources and represents the best judgment of SPS. The information provided in this report, which is issued without prejudice to liability, constitutes neither a warranty of results nor a surety against risks.

Contact

For more information on our Kidnap, Ransom, Extortion and Piracy capabilities please contact our Crisis Management Team at cmt@sps-global.com