

Remarks by U.S. Ambassador Lewis A. Lukens
Kidnapping for Ransom Denial of Benefits Workshop
October 30, 2012

Participants and Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good Morning.

Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the serious threat posed by kidnapping for ransom and to explore the policy options available to counter this growing form of terrorist financing.

Kidnapping for ransom is a growing menace to international security. It has long been used as political leverage and to stoke terror and generate profit. What is different about kidnapping for ransom today is the strategic impact it is having. It fuels instability across entire regions, disrupts commerce, and creates economies based on illicit activity. It empowers our adversaries with steady streams of revenue, enabling them to plan and mount attacks against the United States and our allies.

Today, we see terrorist groups like AQIM and Boko Haram, sometimes in coordination with local criminals, take foreign nationals hostage, and then demand that their victims' governments, employers, or families pay huge sums of money to obtain their release. These hostages run the gamut -- from aid workers to tourists, from employees of private companies to diplomats or other government officials. Terrorist groups have transformed kidnapping for ransom into a successful money-generating scheme, turning it into our most significant terrorist financing threat today.

The U.S. government estimates that terrorist organizations have collected approximately \$120 million in ransom payments over the past eight years. AQIM, the al-Qa'ida affiliate that has likely profited most from kidnapping, has collected tens of millions of dollars through these operations since 2008. It raised significant funds from kidnappings in early 2012, and as of the middle of last month was holding nine hostages.

AQIM uses the revenue generated by kidnappings to fund the full range of its activities, including recruiting and indoctrinating new members, paying salaries, establishing training camps, acquiring weapons and communications gear, staging deadly attacks, and helping to support the next generation of violent extremist groups.

Ransom payments helped fund the takeover of northern Mali by AQIM and its radical Islamist allies, who now maintain a safe haven larger than all of Britain. Within AQIM's safe haven, the residents and historical treasures of Mali have been anything but safe. AQIM and its allies have destroyed UNESCO World Heritage sites in Timbuktu, including sacred Sufi shrines. There are also reports of AQIM planting mines around the ancient city of Gao.

It has become increasingly clear that AQIM is using revenues from kidnappings to expand its reach and influence. Earlier this year, AQIM was expected to provide hundreds of thousands of dollars in financial support to other Africa-based extremist organizations.

As a matter of long-standing policy, the U.S. governments does not pay ransoms or make other concessions to kidnappers. Recent trends indicate that hostage takers prefer not to take U.S. hostages – almost certainly because they understand that they will not receive ransoms, and because they fear a grave response.

Let me assure you that we recognize the real and painful choice that is involved. Governments have a solemn obligation to safeguard the lives and well-beings of their citizens. Employers have a duty to protect their employees. And the families of hostages are impelled by unbreakable bonds to seek the release of their loved ones.

We acknowledge this perceived dilemma; but to pay ransoms is to in fact help sustain terrorist groups that are dedicated to taking innocent lives, and to encourage further kidnapping.

Our goal is not to strengthen only our own defenses, while leaving others to fend for themselves. Our goal is to force terrorist groups to abandon kidnapping by strengthening all of our defenses. If only a few, like-minded governments join the United States in adopting tough measures, including “no concessions” policies – the result could simply be that hostage takers will lose this revenue stream. More than 160 countries, including all members of the European Union, are obligated to cooperate in the prevention of hostage taking under the 1979 International Convention against the Taking of Hostages. This is as much a practical necessity as it is an international legal commitment. There is no better strategy to counter kidnapping than to keep potential victims out of harm’s way in the first place.

Over the next three days, you’ll be discussing some views on the dynamics of kidnapping for ransom, the scope of the threat, how ransoms boost our enemies’ capabilities and reach, the effects of ransom payments, and projections for the future. You’ll also be discussing international agreements, interagency coordination, criminal investigations, transnational operations, negotiations without concessions, and prosecutions.

Preventing kidnappings in the first place and denying terrorists the benefits of ransoms if they are paid pose difficult practical challenges. But these practical difficulties are not insurmountable.

Being here, talking together, is the first step towards creating a framework for law enforcement agencies to work together toward common objectives.

I would like to thank you, no matter what sector of government you come from, for your commitment to attend this important program. We are aware that you all have many demands on your time. You are the ones to lead the way – to set the goals and then accomplish them. We hope that this course is one small step that helps prevent kidnapping in your respective countries, and makes West Africa a safer place for all of us.