

ANNEX

III. Surviving as a hostage

Introduction

Over the past few years the number of staff members who have been kidnapped or taken hostage has increased substantially. Every hostage or kidnap situation is different. There are no strict rules of behaviour; however, there are a number of steps which you can take to minimize the effects of detention and enhance your ability to cope and to see the incident through to a successful release.

Survival considerations

These techniques have been successfully employed by others who have been taken hostage:

- No one can tell an individual whether he or she should resist or not if taken hostage/kidnapped. This decision must be made by each person's own assessment of the circumstances. Resisting the attempt may be extremely risky. You may be injured if you attempt to resist armed individuals. It is possible that you will immediately be blindfolded and drugged.
- Being taken hostage is probably one of the most devastating experiences a staff member can undergo. The first 15 to 45 minutes of a hostage situation are the most dangerous. Follow the instructions of your captors. They are in a highly emotional state, regardless of whether they are psychologically unstable or caught in an untenable situation. They are in a fight or flight reactive state and could strike out. Your job is to survive. After the initial shock wears

Security in the Field

off, your captors are able to better recognize their position. Be certain you can explain everything on your person.

- Immediately after you have been taken, pause, take a deep breath and try to relax. Fear of death or injury is a normal reaction to this situation. Recognizing your reactions may help you adapt more effectively. A hostage usually experiences greatest anxiety in the hours following the incident. This anxiety will begin to decline when the person realizes he/she is still alive – at least for now – and a certain routine sets in. Feelings of depression and helplessness will continue throughout captivity and most hostages will feel deeply humiliated by what they undergo during captivity. Most hostages, however, will quickly adapt to the situation. Remember your responsibility is to survive.
- Do not be a hero; do not talk back or act “tough”. Accept your situation. Any action on your part could bring a violent reaction from your captors.
- Keep a low profile. Avoid appearing to study your abductors, although, to the extent possible, you should make mental notes about their mannerisms, clothes and apparent rank structure. This may help the authorities after your release.
- Be cooperative and obey hostage-takers’ demands without appearing either servile or antagonistic. Be conscious of your body language as well as your speech. Do not say or do anything to arouse the hostility or suspicions of your captors. Do not be argumentative. Act neutral and be a good listener to your captors. Do not speak unless spoken to and then only when necessary. Be cautious about making suggestions to your captors, as you may be held responsible if something you suggest goes wrong.

Surviving as a hostage

- Anticipate isolation and possible efforts by the hostage-takers to disorient you. Your watch may be taken away so you are unable to determine whether it is night or day. Nevertheless, try to maintain a routine.
- Try to keep cool by focusing your mind on pleasant scenes or memories or prayers. Try to recall the plots of movies or books. This will keep you mentally active. You must try to think positively. Try to maintain a sense of humour. It will lessen anxiety.
- Ask for anything you need or want (medicines, books, paper). All they can say is no.
- Build rapport with your captors. Find areas of mutual interest which emphasize personal rather than political interests. An excellent topic of discussion is family and children. If you speak their language, use it – it will enhance communications and rapport.
- Bear in mind that hostages often develop a positive attitude towards their captors. This is known as “Stockholm Syndrome”, after an incident involving hostages at a Swedish bank. In addition, as the hostage identifies with his/her captors, a negative attitude towards those on the outside may develop.
- You may be asked to sign notes verifying that you are alive or you may be asked to write a “confession” that you or the organization have been involved in nefarious activities. The decision to sign these is an individual one based on the situation. Some hostages refuse to sign unless the language of the note is changed. This may help bolster your morale and make you feel less helpless. It can also serve to command a certain degree of respect from the captors.

Security in the Field

- Exercise daily. Develop a daily physical fitness programme and stick to it. If possible, stay well-groomed and clean.
- As a result of the hostage situation, you may have difficulty retaining fluids and may experience a loss of appetite and weight. Try to drink water and eat even if you are not hungry. It is important to maintain your strength.
- Do not make threats against hostage-takers or give any indication that you would testify against them. If hostage-takers are attempting to conceal their identity, give no indication that you recognize them.
- Try to think of persuasive reasons why hostage-takers should not harm you. Encourage them to let authorities know your whereabouts and condition. Suggest ways in which you may benefit your captors in negotiations that would free you. It is important that your abductors view you as a person worthy of compassion and mercy. Never beg, plead or cry. You must gain your captors' respect as well as sympathy.
- If you end up serving as a negotiator between hostage-takers and authorities, make sure the messages are conveyed accurately. Be prepared to speak on the radio or telephone.
- Escape only if you are sure you will be successful. If you are caught, your captors may use violence to teach you and others a lesson.
- At every opportunity, emphasize that, as a United Nations staff member, you are neutral and not involved in politics.
- If there is a rescue attempt by force, drop quickly to the floor and seek cover. Keep your hands over your head. When appropriate, identify yourself.
- Be patient.

Surviving as a hostage

Victim of an airline hijacking

Statistics seem to indicate that airline hijacking is on the decline. However, in order to reduce the trauma and stress related to this experience, all travellers should be prepared for this eventuality. Should you be hijacked, the following suggestions can help you handle the situation:

- Do:**
- Consider requesting a window or centre seat since passengers in such seats are less accessible to the questions and interests of hijackers. In addition, should there be a rescue, those sitting in window or centre seats will be less vulnerable to gunfire in the aisles. On the other hand, it is easier to exit an aircraft if you are sitting in an aisle seat;
 - Get rid of anything that you cannot explain or which might offend the hijackers. If you are wearing or carrying anything which could provoke or irritate the hijackers, discreetly remove it and get rid of it;
 - Try to remain calm and obey the hijackers;
 - Have your passport protected with a leather passport case to make the nationality less prominent if hijackers order passengers to place their passports in a box which is carried down the aisle in order to determine the nationalities of the passengers;
 - Respond simply if you are asked questions by the hijackers;
 - Try to appear uninterested as to what is going on around you. Sleep, read a book, etc. When so occupied, you will be less influenced by what is going on around you, and hijackers do not bother people who are not a threat to them;
 - Try to maintain your composure. Fear of death or injury is natural. Recognizing this may help you

Security in the Field

manage the crisis more effectively. Pause, take a breath and attempt to organize your thoughts;

- Attempt to do exercises in your seat if the hijacking continues beyond a day; such exercises will keep your mind off the incident and will keep your body stimulated;
- In the event of a rescue attempt, slide down in your seat as far as you can or get on the floor, and cover your head and arms with a pillow to avoid being injured.

Do not:

- Say or do anything which might cause the hijackers to take an interest in you;
- Resist the hijackers. Past experience shows that those who react aggressively place themselves at greater risk than those who behave passively;
- Make the fact known that you speak the hijackers' language, if this is the case. Although it is often assumed that speaking the language could enhance your rapport with the hijacker, prior experience indicates that you are better off speaking your native tongue and acquiring information by listening to the hijackers' conversations. This could also provide you with information as to what the hijackers intend to do next;
- Appear sullen or uncommunicative. Doing so depersonalizes you in the eyes of the hijackers and could increase your risks.

Post-release reactions

In many cases, former hostages feel bitter about the treatment they receive after their release. Most hostages feel a strong need to tell their story in detail. If assistance

Surviving as a hostage

in this regard is not provided, request a post-traumatic stress debriefing. Bear in mind that the emotional problems of a former hostage do not appear immediately. Sometimes they appear months later. Whatever happens, readjustment after the incident is a slow process requiring patience and understanding. As soon as the hostage realizes that he or she is a normal person having a normal reaction to an abnormal situation, the healing process can begin.