

Georgian Kidnapping: A Deadly Trend

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The abduction of a British banker in Georgia has dealt another blow to the country's international reputation and raised questions about official collusion in the kidnapping business.

The dramatic abduction of British businessman Peter Shaw in the centre of Tbilisi on June 18 was a grave setback to Georgia's image abroad and its efforts to attract foreign investment.

Shaw, aged 57 and from Cowbridge in South Wales, was the director of the Tbilisi-based Agrobusinessbank. He was kidnapped just two days before he was due to leave Georgia, after spending six years working there.

Shaw's seizure follows the kidnapping of several other overseas businessmen in Georgia over the last two years and several attacks against foreigners. None of the perpetrators have been found or charged, something which arouses increasing suspicions of high-level collusion in the kidnapping business.

The latest abduction poses a strong challenge to Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze, who urged his security ministers to capture Shaw's kidnappers as soon as possible. "Kidnapping has come into fashion in Georgia," Shevardnadze remarked on June 19. "This practice must be uprooted once and for all."

The circumstances of the abduction were a great embarrassment to the law enforcement officials charged with solving it. Shaw's car was ambushed near his apartment in the city centre by unidentified gunmen wearing military fatigues and police uniforms. The latter pulled the businessman out of his car, threatening him with guns.

He put up a struggle - and in the midst of the tussle a police patrol car turned up. The officers, misled by the attackers' fatigues, initially assumed that Shaw was resisting arrest. As soon as the policemen clicked what was going on, another car arrived on the scene carrying accomplices of the criminals, also disguised in police uniforms. They opened fire on the light-armed policemen with automatic weapons. During the exchange of fire, the attackers managed to force Shaw into his own car and escaped.

The entire city police force was immediately put on high alert, emergency checkpoints were set up on the roads throughout Tbilisi and officers searched all passing cars. The next day, police found the abandoned cars of the victim and his kidnappers in the Tbilisi suburb of Dighomi. Shaw's driving license, keys and suit-buttons were all found in his vehicle.

Interior Minister Koba Narchemashvili said that it was unlikely that Shaw has been removed from Tbilisi. However, unofficial sources claim that the abductors moved their victim to the criminal-infested Pankisi Gorge to the north-east of Tbilisi, bordering Russia's breakaway republic of Chechnya.

On June 24, Scotland Yard joined the investigation. Two detectives arrived and will help their Georgian colleagues in tracing Shaw.

The law enforcement agencies are considering two possible reasons for the abduction: a ransom demand or revenge. The latter theory stems from the fact that Shaw seems to have had difficult relations with some business circles in Georgia. The heads of several Georgian banks had been accusing Shaw of bringing their businesses to the brink of ruin.

The kidnap victim arrived in Georgia in 1996. He worked on regional farming reform projects run by the European Union, and then managed credit programmes run by the EU donor organization TACIS. In 1999, he set up Agrobusinessbank, which gave out loans to Georgian farmers. When some did not repay their loans, smaller intermediary banks suffered and a few of them are understood to have blamed Agrobusinessbank for their troubles.

Two Spanish businessmen, Antonio Tremino and Francisco Rodriguez, are the best-known victims of the Georgian kidnapping scourge. The two men were freed December last year after being held for more than a year in captivity.

The circumstances of their abduction were similar to that of Peter Shaw: they were seized by five gunmen from their own cars a few days before they were planning to fly home to Spain. Their families managed to free the hostages by paying 500,000 US dollars to the kidnappers. On their release, the two told how they had been kept in degrading conditions in the Pankisi Gorge.

Last June, Sharbel Bashar Anu, a Lebanese businessman working for a US-owned company in Georgia, was snatched from his car. He was freed by police in December last year in a raid on a derelict house on the outskirts of Tbilisi. The kidnappers managed to escape unharmed.

There have been strong rumours of police involvement in all these kidnappings. Fady Asly, vice-president of the American Chamber of Commerce and a former employer of Sharbel Bushar Anu, said he believes that the chain of crime leads back to high-ranking officials in Georgia.

According to Asly, Anu told him that he was moved to the place where the police found him only an hour before his release. Asly strongly suspects officers knew both the whereabouts of Anu and the identities of the abductors and that a mock police raid was staged, which allowed the kidnappers to go free.

“This kidnapping followed a familiar pattern, which means that the same people are involved,” Asly told IWPR, referring to the seizure of Shaw. “Unfortunately, these people are probably very highly-connected and no one is able to get hold of them.”

He conceded, however, that since the new interior minister came into office, the security situation has improved, “Foreigners aren’t mugged in the streets the way they used to be mugged before.”

Asly was referring to increasing number of assaults on foreigners in Tbilisi, which reached a peak last winter. Many were severely beaten up and had their money and belongings stolen by criminals. In most cases, the criminals have not been found. In one of the worst incidents, Günter Beuchel, an official with the European Commission in Georgia, was robbed and murdered last December. Afterwards, a special department was set up in the interior ministry to combat crimes against overseas visitors.

Crimes against foreigners have hurt Georgia’s reputation. According to Niko Lekishvili, the Head of Taxpayers Union of Georgia, they are also harming the economy because rampant criminal activity is discouraging investors. Many businessmen are reconsidering their position in the country.

“Why should a foreigner come to Georgia today?” Asly asked. “Criminality as well as taxes is higher than elsewhere. It is a small country and it is a very high risk.”

The web-based Daily International Security Report described Georgia as a country with growing crime and

kidnap rates caused by an economic downturn. “Kidnappers will not discriminate between foreigners working for NGOs and those working for commercial firms, as both are presumed to be supported by wealthy organisations able to pay large ransoms,” read the report.

Shaw’s kidnapping has caused the European Commission to express serious concern about Georgia’s reputation. Chris Patten, the EU external relations commissioner, called on President Shevardnadze and the Georgian authorities to provide foreigners resident in Georgia with an adequate level of protection.

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