

Edito*By Patrick Verbruggen, co-director of Triangle G H*

Since 2003, Darfur is the stage of a convoluted civil war that has already caused 300.000 deaths, according to the United Nations estimates (10.000 according to Khartoum), and 2.7 million displaced people.

On top of the original conflict between rebel factions and pro-governmental forces built the fighting between rival Arab tribes and an escalation of banditry and hostage taking aimed at humanitarian or UN members of staff.

Two humanitarians, for instance, were kidnapped on June 23, on the premises of their agency in Nyala, the metropolis of Darfur. This series of abductions has obliged most NGOs to pack up and leave. Others have frozen their aid programmes. Others operate at a distance and never go into the field although our job is to work besides populations living in areas where the traditional chiefs have lost the authority and means to look after for their people.

As with profit-making companies, we are advised to take out special insurance for our humanitarian workers. The captors would then be sure to receive payment of the ransom - and would no doubt harden their methods towards the hostages to further coerce the negotiators. In such situations, utter firmness and determination is essential. Buckling under pressure, giving in to blackmail and accepting the kidnappers' claims can only encourage a hunt for expatriates although Sudan is incapable of stopping the abductions of foreign workers.

Our policy is to refuse to pay a ransom, to go through the standard paths of dialogue, persuasion and peaceful resolution. Making exceptions to this policy could compromise everybody's safety and our capacity to work in the conflict zones and other sensitive areas of many countries.

[Calls for tenders](#) / [Legal notes](#) / [Webmaster](#) / [Contacts](#) / [Site map](#) / [Crédits](#)

On November 22, 2009, two members of our team were kidnapped in Birao, Central African Republic. They were freed 112 days.

Chronicle of a kidnapping

by Olivier Denis, former Wash¹ Manager, and Olivier Frappé, former Programmes Coordinator for Triangle G H in Birao, Central African Republic (CAR).

Sunday the 22nd of November 2009: a well-deserved day of rest. We have just completed the distribution of 250 tons of food. Our school construction programmes in the prefecture have started, supervised by Aurélio, our logistician – works manager, currently 140 km away from the base², in the company of Jen, our Education Officer, who is running a management training course for pupils' parents organisations.

Only two of us are in the Birao base that day: Olivier Frappé, Programmes Coordinator, about to launch the pre-harvest surveys in Birao and surrounding areas, and Olivier Denis, Wash Manager, in the middle of organising emergency access to water for people recently displaced to Birao. We have been here for almost two months but remain in a state of alert and expats do not travel into the bush, where banditism is a strong risk, for instance.

A short jog through town allows us to stay fit and say hello to some of the 300 peacekeepers from Togo. Together with 70 FACAs, they are³ in charge of the town's security. In reality, this security outfit is dissuasive rather than effective due to the limitations of the MINURCAT's⁴ mandate and the lack of equipment in the CAR's regular army.

We have supper around 10:30. This evening, we talk about our pleasure of working with Triangle G H, particularly in this country, where aid is fully justified by the population's needs and motivation. We toast the good fortune of being here.

11:30 pm. Two successive blasts against the gate. A few seconds later, a focused, determined looking man in paramilitary gear aims his gun at us. We picture a raid on the town before deciding that our base must be the target; we are aware of such risks and cooperate with the fifteen men aiming their weapons in our direction. Despite the close presence of MINURCAT and FACA, the assailants take control of the place easily, without any sign of fear. We hope to be released a few kilometres away. Instead, we discover some hours later that we have been taken hostage. We are treated well but the death threats are real.

On the first day of our life with our captors, one of them tells us that it is he who will explain why we have been kidnapped. He speaks in Arabic, the language that we will use to communicate all through captivity. (An interpreter with dubious links to our captors will only appear from time to time). At this point, we are exhausted by 11 chaotic hours driving through the night in a 4x4. Our ability to focus is weak as we listen to the man telling us we have been taken hostage because of religion and the persecution of Islam by the West. Later, other captors will say that we are hostages because our country supports non-distribution of the revenue from Chad's oil wealth. Even later, we are associated with groups exploiting the CAR's diamonds. The ideals defended by these so-called rebels progressively take on shady tones that ultimately betray a total lack of ideals. These men are simply thirsty for quick and easy money.

During the first week, the captors reassure us daily: we will soon be released in exchange for the ransom and there is no need for panic. At this point, we all believe that the sum will be paid immediately, regardless of the amount demanded. Our captors have assured us that payment of the ransom is the only chance we have of escaping death - we simply cannot imagine that the amount is under question or subject to negotiation.

We stay in the company of the men who raided the base. Their charismatic and smart leader is concerned about our mental health and maintains a reassuring tone. His 14 henchmen respect him but despite their individual personalities, they all display fairly unstable attitudes, and a weakness for Kalachnikovs⁵ and easy money.

When talking to our captors, it is vital to avoid the subject of money... but money is central to all their conversations. They use grotesque means and affect friendship to ascertain our level of wealth by probing our OSI⁶, our private lives, our families and our pasts. We try to avoid their questions without losing their trust. We discretely assess the bearing of our lies to avoid raising suspicions during future discussions with the men. We spend most of our time anticipating our response strategy for the next interrogation and thus foil their attempts to prove that we can pay the price demanded. They leave us alone all day long so the two of us can share ideas about our defence and consider every point that the men are likely to bring up in the evening, around the camp-fire. Our lives depend on our ability to persuade them that we belong to a neutral, non-for-profit organisation that has no funds.

Facing our lack of involvement in the negotiations and our mock indifference to their death threats (now constantly mentioned in their jokes), our captors finally declare that we will soon be sent to Algeria. Allegedly, the chief is already in Algeria, negotiating our sale to more aggressive factions. We will be dropped in the desert unless we manage to feign some degree of interest in the interminable negotiations with the administration in Paris – a negotiation where every party appears to be on totally different wavelengths. So we feign fear but secretly continue our strategic games. This state of constant waiting is difficult to endure. We keep wondering whether France is really committed to getting us out. We have doubts about seeing a positive exit in the close future. Christmas goes by without the slightest promise of progress. Although we spend time alone, both of us refuse to get swallowed by bleak thoughts and despair over a situation that declines further every day. There is no money, no liberating phone-call, no possibility of forces intervening, no hope of making our captors understand what an OSI is (even with the help of a French speaking interpreter). So we drive our imagination to create games (cards with empty cigarette packets, dice carved out of tree branches, agility games with bottle tops). We even plan our escape game, for if no-one can save us, we can do it ourselves, we just need to get organised!

Our relationship with the captors is completely surreal. They take turns leaving the camp for one or two days before returning. At times, only two men are in charge of watching us. Olivier is given a good haircut. We obtain a new radio and a flawless mosquito net. Our walks at sunset take place under loose surveillance, with the guards walking at an almost respectable distance. They invite us to test their guns and try learning the rules of poker. They pass round their "peace smokes", and offer us alcohol and even women to lighten our mood. We refuse politely. Some of the men imitate us during our workouts while others help us make juggling equipment. They respond to our (deliberate) cravings for fresh fruit and supply us, as best they can, with tomatoes, watermelon and mangoes. We even obtain vitamins in capsules. Our aim is to weigh as heavy as possible in terms of logistics but they have an answer to everything. This lenient climate is not continuous. Whenever we can, we remind our captors that we don't belong here and that our families are waiting for us. However such vexing topics often generate whiplash so we stay patient, juggling with words that sometimes betray our distrust and sometimes elicit their trust.

In the background of this masquerade, the telephone rings every two days, then once a week, then every fortnight, then once a month. At the end of the line, Paris wants to know the latest news. We have nothing decisive to say because we let ourselves be convinced that they are doing everything they can.

After 100 days of detention, we impress upon our captors our need to go home. We stop forcing ourselves to laugh at their easy jokes. We create a gloomy atmosphere by acting like sulky kids and I throw my tee shirt into the campfire as a protest sign. On the 105th day, we launch a fake hunger strike. These signs of distress coincide with increasingly frequent and tense phone calls from Paris, then from Khartoum. They promise imminent freedom; we remain sceptical... Yet, without warning, on our 112th day of detention, believing that we are just changing camps again, we find ourselves on a track leading to freedom. After walking a while to descend from our "cover", we discover a car and some men waiting for us. 200 kilometres later, we reach a village in West Darfur where a helicopter will land at dusk.

It is hard to understand what finally forced our captors to release us. Possibly a mixture of despair about obtaining the ransom, pressure from their wives left alone, fear of being attacked by the regular army or other bandits for whom we could appear attractive. The multiplication of negotiation channels and interlocutors finally obliged our captors to make certain concessions. The sang-froid and professionalism of people in Paris ultimately worked. On our side, our simulations of ill health and our refusal to eat for a while certainly forced destiny's hand...

So we both came home in sound health. We had not suffered mistreatment and suffered no psychological aftermath. The ordeal was evidently easier to overcome because there were two of us, mutually providing support to the other. Despite everything, we came home ever motivated by our profession and ready to return to the field after a real period of rest!

¹ Water & Sanitation

² The term is used here to represent our team's living quarters and workplace e

³ Central African Armed Forces

⁴ United Nations Mission in the CAR and Tchad

⁵ Automatic rifle first developed in the Soviet Union

⁶ International Solidarity Organisation

[Plus d'Info : /AncienneVersion/English/html/Programmes/MissionsHumanitaire/RCA/CentralAfricanRepublic_gb.html](#)



[Traditional well](#)



[A well built by Triangle G H](#)



[Birao school, rehabilitated by Triangle G H](#)



[A standard school in Vakağa](#)



[Construction works in Ouanda Djallé school](#)

[Calls for tenders](#) / [Legal notes](#) / [Webmaster](#) / [Contacts](#) / [Site map](#) / [Crédits](#)

