

Kidnappings of U.S. citizens in Mexico on rise

by Tony Manolatos - CNS

SAN DIEGO - Organized, well-financed and violent Mexican kidnapping cells are targeting a growing number of U.S. citizens visiting communities popular with San Diegans and other California residents.

Last year, at least 26 San Diego County residents were kidnapped and held for ransom in Tijuana, Rosarito Beach or Ensenada, local FBI agents overseeing the cases said Tuesday. In 2006, at least 11 county residents had been kidnapped in the three communities.

"Some of the 26 were recovered, some were hurt and some were killed," said agent Alex Horan, who directs the FBI's violent-crime squad in San Diego.

"It's not a pleasant experience. Victims have reported beatings, torture and there have been rapes. ... Handcuffs and hoods over the head are common," he said.

When contrasted to the 40 million border crossings made every year at the San Ysidro Port of Entry, the kidnapping numbers are small. Most of the victims have business interests or family members in Mexico.

But authorities said anyone planning to visit Mexico should be cautious.

"I would certainly be concerned," Horan said.

The U.S. Consulate in Tijuana issued a travel advisory last week that said U.S. citizens living and traveling in Mexico should be extra vigilant.

Gunfights and other violence linked to drug cartels have increased in Baja California, and more Mexican citizens have been kidnapped lately.

While some of the groups suspected of kidnapping Americans are connected to drug trafficking, most aren't, Horan said.

He described the kidnapping groups as sophisticated operations similar to terrorist cells, each with a boss and clear divisions of labor. Usually, one group is involved in scouting, another carries out the kidnapping, a third holds the victim and a fourth handles the ransom.

"They know who they're going after. I think they have a list," Horan said. "These are kidnapping cells... That's what they do. They do kidnappings all year long."

While the FBI wouldn't say what the ransom demands are, or how often they're paid, agents said money is driving the increase.

"This is not about terrorizing people or retaliating. This is about making money, and obviously this is good business for them," Horan said.

The scenario that fits about 90 percent of the FBI's kidnapping cases starts with a middle-class family with no criminal ties, who live in nearby communities such as Chula Vista, San Diego and National City.

The family typically owns a business in Mexico and has relatives there. At least one family member, usually a man in his 40s, makes several personal and professional trips across the border.

While driving in Mexico, this person is pulled over by as many as 10 people posing as police.

They're carrying weapons, wearing vests and using police jargon. Within a minute or two, someone is shoving a hood over the victim's head and dragging him into a vehicle. His car is left on the side of the road.

"We've had victims held for days to months," Horan said.

Not every victim is Hispanic, but there have been "very few cases where a tourist is targeted at random," said Eric Drickersen, who supervises the FBI's border liaison office in San Diego.

Some of the kidnappings go unreported because people fear retribution, Drickersen said.

Ransom demands are almost always made over the phone. The cross-border communication gives the FBI its jurisdiction. But the agents need authorization from Mexican authorities before they can carry out an operation across the border.

Mexican authorities have been helpful, their U.S. counterparts said.

"They're cooperating, but we would like them to do even more," Drickersen said.

A week ago, Mexican authorities rescued two female real estate agents who were being held in a Tijuana neighborhood. The women were kidnapped Jan. 19 by three men after showing a property in southern Tijuana, the Baja California Attorney General's Office said in a statement.

The men called in a ransom demand of \$350,000, the statement said. Family members negotiated a payment of \$27,000 and dropped off the cash, but the women weren't released.

Baja California state agents tracked down the vehicle used to pick up the cash. The driver led authorities to the women, and three men were arrested.

Both women are Mexican citizens, although one is married to a U.S. resident. She and her husband live in Chula Vista.

Sandra Dibble contributed to this report.

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