

[EXTRACT]

## **Child kidnappings a growing problem in Pakistan**

By Tom Morgan, Press Association

The gang who snatched five-year-old Sahil Saeed could be linked to wider militant groups - with child kidnappings becoming a growing problem in Pakistan, leading experts said today.

The abduction was symptomatic of the "extremely weak police force and the general breakdown of law and order in Punjab", said Farzana Shaikh, author of Making Friends With Pakistan.

Pakistan is among the top five most dangerous countries in the world for kidnap and ransom with incidents in the "mid-to-high hundreds" each year, according to estimates from global security firm red24.

But Ms Shaikh said it was rare to see a Briton targeted.

She said: "Firstly, we know very little about the actual circumstances of the kidnapping. We have just hearsay and it is difficult to know whether it is just a criminal gang or wider militant groups, which are becoming more widespread and well established in Punjab.

"If it's the latter then it is a concern - if it is the former then it would raise fewer worries from a wider British perspective."

Kidnappings of Britons in the country remain rare but the incident could damage Pakistan's already battered reputation for safety, she said.

"I think it will raise the temperature and bring the spotlight back onto Pakistan which is already struggling with a poor image.

"This is too early to suggest if kidnappings are a growing trend - I suspect not - it's important not to get too out of hand."

Punjab is a particularly dangerous area thanks to the spread of militancy since the 1990s, she added.

"That militancy has spread out from the tribal regions to Punjab. This is well-documented.

"They have long been attached to the Punjab and some even have links with al Qaida.

"Unquestionably this will be of concern to police, especially considering the worrying indictment that members of the Punjabi government have been reluctant to renounce their contact with militant groups."

Lee Niblett, of red24, said Pakistani government statistics on kidnap were unreliable.

But he added: "Pakistan is in the top five countries in the world for kidnap for ransom incidents.

"Pakistani government statistics on the kidnap and ransom threat, like many in the developing world, are unreliable.

"Many incidents are not reported to the authorities for fear of retaliation by the kidnapers or of police corruption, collusion or ineptitude.

"There are also wide disparities in figures between police departments and other law enforcement agencies.

"However, we at red24 estimate that actual kidnap and ransom incidents probably number in the mid to high hundreds annually.

"There appears to have been a spike in kidnappings at the start of this year.

"Kidnappings in Pakistan are carried out by Pakistani militants, separatists, professional criminal groups and inexperienced and desperate criminal individuals.

"The majority of kidnappings for ransom, however, involve criminal gangs who normally target local businessmen.

"Although foreign nationals have been targeted, particularly by Pakistani-Taliban, other Islamist militant groups and Baluch separatists, the majority of victims remain local nationals."

The abduction of children in Pakistan is an increasing problem, Mr Niblett added.

"By targeting youngsters, kidnapers hope to play on the parents' emotions to secure quick and sizeable ransom payments."

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Source: Independent.co.uk website (04 March 2010)

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/child-kidnappings-a-growing-problem-in-pakistan-1916115.html>