# Where foreigners must not tread

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The capture of three men involved in the kidnapping of American vlogger Elliot Eastman in Mindanao is one of those rare occasions that prove Philippine authorities can take swift, decisive action when it counts, especially with a little prodding from the United States.

In a country where crime victims could go missing for years—from vanished activist Jonas Burgos to the disappeared ”sabungeros” (cockfight aficionados)—it’s a little jarring to see such a quick breakthrough in one foreigner’s case, with six suspects already charged in court, half of them the subject of a manhunt.

But the lack of a ransom demand for Eastman or even proof of his life more than two weeks after his disappearance casts a pall on efforts to save him and bring the perpetrators to justice. As his fate remains a mystery, the American’s abduction has blackened further the reputation of Mindanao, or a large swath of it, as an unsafe destination.

Many might reproach Eastman for not heeding travel advisories and repeated verbal warnings against staying in Sibuco town, Zamboanga del Norte, where he was residing with his Filipino wife—and they would not be wrong to do so—but the blame for the absence of peace and order should not fall on the shoulders of clueless foreigners. What’s clear is Eastman’s abduction on Oct. 17 was the consequence of lawlessness in that region and the government’s failure to protect residents and travelers alike.

## Shot in the leg for resisting

Based on news accounts, Eastman was abducted at gunpoint by men disguised as police operatives and wielding M16 rifles from his coastal home in Sitio Tungawan, Barangay Poblacion. His abductors reportedly shot him in the leg when he resisted, forcing him aboard a motorboat that headed toward open water.

Only 13 days later, the Philippine National Police announced that three suspects were in the custody of its Zamboanga command. Along with three others being hunted down, the suspects will face kidnapping and serious illegal detention charges, the PNP said.

“But until now we have not received any information about the demand for ransom. Sadly, we still don’t have any proof of life,” the PNP spokesperson, Brig. Gen. Jean Fajardo, said.

The PNP Zamboanga command said the suspects in custody had “direct participation in the kidnapping.”

Lt. Col. Helen Galvez, PNP Region 9 spokesperson, said two of the three suspects had turned themselves in, while the third was arrested in an operation, all of them confessing to have acted as lookouts and spotters during the abduction. “We are still optimistic that he (Eastman) is still alive,” she said. All six suspects belong to crime groups operating in the Sibuco area as “common criminals … who only worked together after seeing a vulnerable victim,” Galvez said.

## US travel advisory

No wonder Washington continues to advise its citizens to steer clear of Mindanao.

Based on its latest travel advisory dated May 16, the US Department of State asks Americans not to travel to the Sulu archipelago and Marawi City. US nationals are also advised to reconsider travel to other parts of Mindanao, except Davao City, Davao del Norte province, Siargao Island, and the Dinagat Islands, “due to crime, terrorism, civil unrest, and kidnapping.”

“Terrorist and armed groups in Mindanao have historically engaged in kidnappings for ransom, in addition to bombings and other attacks. These incidents often target foreign nationals, including US citizens, as well as civilians, local government entities, and security forces,” it states.

A day before Eastman’s kidnapping, there had been yet another reminder of the myriad security challenges facing Mindanao: A Taguig court found 17 members of the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group guilty of the abduction of 21 individuals from the Malaysian island resort of Sipadan in 2000, holding them hostage for months in Sulu province.

## Held back by conflict

The alleged bandits were sentenced to reclusion perpetua, or between 20 and 40 years of imprisonment, for each count of kidnapping and serious illegal detention with ransom. The crime happened in April 2000, when the Philippines had yet to enact a law on terrorism.

Mindanao, of course, has come a long way since the wave of kidnappings in the 1990s and 2000s. Over the years, peace agreements with insurgents that led to the creation of a self-governing Bangsamoro region have quieted much of the unrest among the locals, while relentless military operations have weakened smaller armed groups operating in the southern Philippines, like the Abu Sayyaf.

But Eastman’s case shows that there is still much work to do in stomping out crime and terrorism in Mindanao, which boasts of a natural beauty and bountiful resources but is being held back by conflict and widespread poverty. Until and unless the government restores order and gains control of lawless elements, including Eastman’s abductors, on the island, much of Mindanao will remain a place where foreigners must not tread.