

SETTING UP INTERVIEWS WITH POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS PEOPLE

Clearly since the unthinkable happened with Daniel Pearl, a lot of thought has been directed towards the issue of meetings or private interviews.

The increasing incidences of abduction by terrorist groups, with shocking stories such as this one, shows how political and religious extremists are often relentless in the pursuit of their goals. Abductors, terrorists and criminals go to great lengths to lure their victims and could have been planning how they will do it for some time. Underestimating a person's true intent can prove fatal.

At Centurion we advise all journalists to approach ANY arrangements for meetings with unknown parties extremely cautiously. Think in terms of the potential risks/hazards and identify courses of action to negate them.

The planning of meetings, and emergency drills, should be carefully thought through and discussed in great detail with colleagues and heads of departments

There may be several meeting options open to you, but if none of them reduces the risks to your safety, or you feel uneasy, clearly the meeting should not take place in its current form. A re-think is necessary.

When meeting with contacts at places unknown, and where practical, there should be some form of stage planning to the event. Agreed, in some cases time will not allow this to happen as the event unfolds so fast. However, there are a few guidelines to consider and implement if time permits:

What time and place is the meeting?

Is it their choice or yours?

Never agree to meet after dark.

Meet only in busy, populated areas.

Where practical have some form of escape route planned.

Research the likely threats to your safety: from your initial contact; the people taking you to the meeting; the people you are meeting at the location. Have you heard, read or seen someone from the same group or organisation carry out atrocities before?

Find out as much information about the person you are supposed to meet - political/racial and religious tendencies. Do your political, racial and religious tendencies oppose theirs?

Have you had a chance to observe the proposed meeting place prior to the meeting actually taking place?

Never go alone - always insist there is some one with you.

Have you informed your head of department. If not, WHY NOT?

Have you told the head of department as much as you know? If not, WHY NOT?

Arrange for some form of back up vehicle or person(s) to follow you from a distance to observe and watch for any other external threats.

A communication system of some form should be established prior to commencing the trip to the meeting, whether by radio/cell phone/open two-way communications. Be aware that you may be searched prior to the meeting, and if carrying communications/covert camera/ear piece, etc., the discovery of it may generate ill feeling towards you.

A plan should be devised in readiness should you not return from the location of the meeting after a set period of time, so your fellow 'observer' can inform the appropriate authorities.

Does it 'feel' risky? If so, DON'T GO!

The above are only guidelines, but basically, if it doesn't feel right, don't risk it.