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French engineer kidnapped in north Nigeria

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AP

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LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — More than 30 assailants stormed a house in northern Nigeria, killing two people and kidnapping a French engineer, in the latest abduction to hit the West African nation, officials said Thursday.

The engineer, a contractor for French renewable energy firm Vergnet SA, appeared to have been the target, Katsina state police chief Abdullahi Magaji said. A neighbor and a security guard were killed in the attack on the Frenchman's home Wednesday night in the town of Rimi, 15 miles (25 kilometers) from the city of Katsina, he said.

The assailants also attacked a nearby police station as they drove off with the hostage, but no one there was hurt, Magaji added. There had been no request for ransom or any other communication from the kidnappers as of Thursday evening, he said.

French President Francois Hollande, speaking to reporters during a state visit in Algeria, said French authorities would do all they could to free the hostage. Vergnet issued a statement that said the company "immediately took extra security measures for all its employees abroad" and that it is in touch with French authorities.

The attack comes amid a spate of ransom kidnappings, which usually last for a few days, in Africa's most populous nation. But most have occurred in Nigeria's oil-rich southern delta, a kidnapping hotspot.

Four South Koreans and a Nigerian working for Korea-based Hyundai Heavy Industries Co. were abducted Monday from a construction site in Bayelsa state, in the delta region. The 83-year-old mother of Finance Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala was kidnapped earlier this month and held for five days in close-by Delta state.

This latest kidnapping, however, occurred in the Nigeria's Sahelian north, which has only recently started to see abductions. The kidnappings in the area also have lasted longer and been linked to radical Islamist groups rather than criminal gangs.

A Briton and an Italian kidnapped in Nigeria were abducted in May last year and executed about 10 months later as a commando rescue operation closed in on them. Nigerian authorities blamed a splinter group of the radical Islamist sect known as Boko Haram, but a sect spokesman denied the group's involvement. In a video released while the hostages were still alive, the kidnappers claimed that they were members of al-Qaida. Western military officials and diplomats have said Boko Haram has loose ties to al-Qaida.

The kidnappers had stormed Chris McManus' apartment, kidnapping him alongside Franco Lamolinara, about 350 miles (560 kilometers) from where Wednesday's kidnapping occurred.

Al-Qaida has been linked to other kidnappings of foreigners in the area, especially ones targeting French nationals, who have become a high value target in Africa's Sahel region.

France has led efforts to launch a military intervention in northern Mali, where a mix of al-Qaida linked rebels now control an area the size of France or Texas, an enormous triangle of land that includes borders with Mauritania, Algeria and Niger. Militants there have indicated that they plan to use the French hostages they are currently holding as human shields.

