



Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en
Documentatiecentrum

Cahier 2021-27

Tweede verkennende studie Liquidaties

Summary

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Cahier

De reeks Cahier omvat de rapporten van onderzoek dat door en in opdracht van het Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum is verricht. Opname in de reeks betekent niet dat de inhoud van de rapporten het standpunt van de Minister van Justitie en Veiligheid weergeeft.

Summary

Contract killings in the Netherlands

Second exploratory study

Although contract killings are not a new phenomenon in the Netherlands, an exploratory study in 2017 showed that the methods used in these assassinations are constantly changing. One of the findings of the study was that the availability of new groups of hitmen and new means are leading to a number of changes in modus operandi. On the one hand, a process of professionalisation was identified in terms of preparations for contract killings, involving the use of the latest technological resources. On the other hand, it was established that coarser methods are being used for the actual shootings, which was attributed to the abundance of heavy firearms available in the Netherlands and of new, inexperienced hitmen. In 2018, the Netherlands was once again shaken by excessive deadly violence perpetrated by the criminal world. Incidents included the murder of a crown witness's brother and the witness's lawyer a year later. In order to continue to inform parliament and society about trends and developments in relation to the phenomenon of contract killings, the Ministry of Justice and Security has requested an update to the findings of the exploratory study. To this end, we have carried out another exploratory study of new trends and developments. This report presents the findings of this second exploratory study.

The key question was as follows:

What recent developments can be identified in relation to the phenomenon of contract killings according to officers in the police and judiciary?

For recent developments, we looked at the background, motives, individuals involved and modus operandi of contract killings.

Investigators had access to more information in recent years than they did five years ago, due to the decryption of encrypted text messages from what are known as 'pretty good privacy' (PGP) phones. These encrypted messages go back to 2014. Findings from the previous study can consequently be adjusted based on this additional information. In this report, we therefore look at recent developments since 2014, broadly referred to as changes in 'the last decade'.

This study essentially uses the same sources and methods as those in the first exploratory study, namely open interviews with officers from the investigative sphere, supplemented with available internal police documents and open sources. Open interviews were held with 21 officers within the police and judiciary who have knowledge about contract killings due to the nature of their work.

Please note that this report primarily looks at new trends and developments and therefore does not give a representative picture of *all* contract killings perpetrated in the last decade.

Findings

Generally speaking, conflicts within the organised drugs trade still form the backdrop to contract killings by organised crime groups. This picture can be further refined and adjusted, however, on the basis of information such as new insights from deciphered text messages. The assumption that a contract killing is a 'last resort' for resolving conflicts between individuals or criminal groups and that the organised crime group first tries to use less extreme measures no longer applies if we look at some of the contract killings carried out in the last decade. The officers who were interviewed now place a stronger emphasis on the elements of retribution and intimidation as primary motives for contract killings. Contract killings also appear to serve as an internal punishment within the criminal group itself, without the need for 'high treason' on the part of the victim and without first seeking a less extreme solution. Officers also point to irrational, more emotional reasons for ordering assassinations with the primary aim of taking revenge, showing power and instilling fear. This development is taking place against the background of a developing drugs market, which has seen the continuing growth of international cocaine trafficking and the establishment of new groups of drug traffickers in the Netherlands in recent years. Those interviewed point to the huge sums of money now earned by cocaine traffickers. The new developments identified in relation to the phenomenon of contract killings and, which are central to this report, are principally associated with new groups of cocaine traffickers. For this reason, the report mainly concerns the criminal drugs networks in which new developments are occurring.

In the previous exploratory study, the crude and sloppy methods of hitmen were attributed to inexperience combined with the wide availability of fully automatic firearms. We found that contract killings are often clumsily executed, frequently resulting in the wrong people being assassinated and bystanders being at risk of being fatally hit. This 'collateral damage' was attributed first and foremost to a poor modus operandi and an overkill of violence. Now that investigations have delivered more information about the background to and communication about contract killings, we are able to refine and complete this picture. It has emerged that this crudeness in the execution of contract killings can also be attributed to the methods of the principals. On the one hand, there is the adoption of a crude, intimidating approach that is reflected in the broadening of the target at whom excessive violence is aimed. On the other hand, remote management through the use of digital technology and the division of tasks also plays a role. These points are described in greater detail below.

Extension of excessive violence

Officers who were interviewed identified a hardening of the mentality of principals ordering contract killings. They had noticed a gross lack of regard for human life and point to a sense of urgency, impatience and the apparent ease with which assassinations are sometimes ordered, based on the content of encrypted text messages. However, we have less information about how principals previously talked about contract killings, because investigators had much less access to these communications in the past. It is entirely possible that the attitude of indifference is not so much new as more visible due to the availability of digital text messages.

It is true, however, that this attitude is reflected not only in the intercepted text messages but also in the shift in assassination attempts to a broader target group. We are witnessing a sliding scale in the extension of excessive violence. Members of an organised crime group's own ranks are punished for relatively minor mistakes, and according to officials, there is now a stronger internal punishment culture within these

groups. In addition, some contract killings appear to be intentionally carried out in the presence of family and children to create an intimidating effect. In these cases, the risks to bystanders do not appear to be due to clumsiness on the part of the hitmen, but rather the result of deliberately seeking situations that also pose a risk to non-criminal family members. Moreover, targeted deadly violence has spread to circles outside the criminal world, to people who themselves are not part of the criminal networks. According to officers who were interviewed, the shift in deadly violence to wider circles outside the criminal world is a new development that has not been witnessed in this form among older criminal networks. It is true that, in the past, individuals who were suspected of planning to give evidence to the police were also victims of targeted killings. However, this punishment of betrayal was limited to people who were part of the criminal network and who spoke to the police in this capacity; the violence did not extend to the circles of their non-criminal relatives, such as loved ones and lawyers.

Officers generally note that contract killings of people who are not involved in organised crime place a great amount of pressure on legal proceedings. Attempts are made to influence participants in proceedings right up to the court hearings, both through the actual murder of parties involved and through threats and instilling fear within the judiciary, the legal profession, the press and law enforcement. At the same time, it is highly doubtful whether this grudge-fuelled approach serves the business interests of international drugs trafficking. After all, the attacks draw the attention of investigators to the organised crime groups to which the murder is linked.

Division of tasks and new technology

If we then look at the criminal business process and the division of tasks and management of contract killings, we see the following. The phenomenon of 'murder brokers' and executive violent groups specialising in preparing for and carrying out contract killings is still clearly visible. There is a division of tasks here between the 'spotters', who explore the area and observe the intended victim in preparation for the murder, and the hitmen, who actually commit the murder by fatally shooting the victim. A number of those interviewed emphasise this differentiation of tasks in the preparation and execution of contract killings and state that this is typical of contract killings carried out by new cocaine groups. This strict division of tasks and labour gives the appearance of being efficient and professional, but can at the same time lead to risks and errors in the actual execution of the murder. It used to be the case that the routes and habits of the target and their surroundings were often observed by the hitmen themselves, giving them a clear picture of the intended victim and the setting. Even where hitmen were previously 'flown in' from abroad, they took the time to familiarise themselves with the setting and the intended victim. Now that many hitmen no longer carry out the observations themselves, there is a risk of incorrect information being passed on. The risk of information loss is even greater if the spotters and the hitmen do not communicate directly with one another, or worse, do not know each other, but receive messages via a broker or from the top of the organised crime group. Communication about the execution often takes place through short written text messages, which also poses a risk in terms of the transfer of information. It is possible that the risk of incorrect information transfer – in some cases, all a hitman has to go on is a picture and the colour of a car – can lead to the assassination of the wrong person. A clumsy execution is then mainly due to strict division of tasks and cell structure from the top of the crime group.

In addition, more time was spent in the past on observing the target in their own physical environment. Thanks to the professional IT equipment used by spotters to

identify potential victims, such as GPS trackers, cameras and spy software, the target can be monitored remotely. Spotters are therefore less likely to be observed, but are also less familiar with the surroundings of the target.

The principal is also separated from the location of the victim and the hitman by this geographical distance. Encrypted telephone technology has made it possible to communicate quickly and easily over long distances. In a number of cases, principals were probably in faraway places at the time of ordering assassinations, at a substantial physical distance from the intended victim's location. According to a number of the people interviewed, this technology has made it easier to order and manage assassinations. Many principals have now been arrested and detained. A number of officers point to the potential consequences of the many arrests and sentences, including life sentences, in terms of activities within and from prison.

Fall in the number of contract killings and more excessive violence

Although the aim of this exploratory study is to make *qualitative* statements regarding the nature of the phenomenon of contract killings, the report also contains an overview of the number of killings since 2000. The number of 'successful' contract killings in the Netherlands has fluctuated since 2000 with an average of between 20 and 30 per year, but this has declined in recent years: to 18 contract killings in 2019 and only 10 contract killings in 2020. The fall in 2020 is particularly unusual and marks a record low. In terms of possible explanations, officers point to the large number of arrests and ongoing criminal trials (these and other potential explanations are discussed in chapter 4 of this report). The developments identified in relation to excessive violence are not reflected in the decreasing numbers seen in recent years. The changes therefore concern the *nature* of the phenomenon, which cannot be properly expressed in numbers. Moreover, the developments identified in this report relate not only to recent years (in which the number of contract killings fell) but to the period from 2014. It is also worth stating that recent years have not seen a reduction in the number of mistaken identity killings. Such 'mistakes' point to errors in the execution and to fatalities who themselves are not involved in the criminal world. Of the ten contract killings in 2020, two involved the shooting of the wrong person. There were also two mistaken identity killings in 2018 and one in 2017. At least nine mistaken identity killings occurred in the period from 2013 to 2016.

Finally

Access to encrypted text messages has provided more insight into the communication surrounding contract killings, and into actions and management at the top level of the organisation. Consequently, we have a more detailed picture of the world behind contract killings. A paradoxical finding here is that, on the one hand, major financial interests are at stake for organised crime groups in view of the huge sums earned through international drugs trafficking, while on the other hand, contract killings seem to be strongly motivated by a desire for retribution. Strict business and economic interests seem to play a secondary role in the ordering of assassinations, given that the excessive and conspicuous use of violence attracts more attention from investigators, also for the underlying drugs organisations. For those at the top, being on the police's radar would be a strategic disadvantage, and a very violent reputation is unlikely to contribute to the success of the illegal drugs operation. The availability of murder brokers and executive violent groups combined with the availability of new technology and unlimited financial resources has perhaps meant that leaders of new criminal groups are quicker to order an assassination. This seems to contradict the

recent fall in the number of targeted shootings, but this is not necessarily the case. The reduction in the number of 'successful' contract killings does not change the fact that some of the killings that *do* take place can be more extreme in terms of the use of violence. The criminal arrest of leaders of organised crime groups could be the cause of the two parallel developments: a fall in the number of successful contract killings and, at the same time, a broadening of the group at which the targeted deadly violence is aimed. The question here is whether these identified developments are of a temporary and incidental nature due to the inextricable link to criminal groups that are currently in the picture or whether they are structural changes that reflect a new social reality. The next exploratory study in five years' time will presumably help to answer this question.

Het Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum (WODC) is het kennisinstituut voor het ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid. Het WODC doet zelf onafhankelijk wetenschappelijk onderzoek of laat dit doen door erkende instituten en universiteiten, ter ondersteuning van beleid en uitvoering.

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