

Endangered Missionaries Learn How To Manage in Hostile Situations

Danita Estrella, who runs an orphanage in Haiti, was one of many missionaries caught in sudden danger in early 2004

Like most missionaries working in Third World countries, Danita Estrella knew there was a high potential for danger when she moved to Haiti five years ago to found an orphanage in one of the world's poorest regions. But that potential became reality in February when armed rebels took to the streets to oust President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Estrella is "mom" to 38 orphans at her Hope for Haiti home. She also runs a school that educates and feeds another 400 children in the town of Ouanaminthe. She was contacted by the U.S Embassy in Port-au-Prince and urged to leave immediately, but she declined their offer of a chartered flight back to the safety of the United States.

"Haiti is my home," she told Charisma in an interview via a cell phone. "These are my children—my sons and daughters. I can't leave them."

When rebels invaded her town—local police already had left—Estrella and the children sequestered themselves inside the orphanage. From her kitchen window the 39-year-old from Tampa, Fla., saw rebels running through the streets, shooting guns and setting fire to the police station and homes of local Aristide supporters.

Rebels then surrounded her next-door neighbor's home with guns drawn, demanding his weapons. One of the rebels spotted Estrella in the window and started shouting: "American! American!"

"I was so scared," Estrella said. Her neighbors yelled at the rebels to leave her alone, explaining that she takes care of orphans and feeds people. "They left and went to another neighbor's home," Estrella said, "but they never touched us."

She credits supernatural intervention for protecting her and the children. Rebel leaders later came to the orphanage to offer assistance in getting food or water.

At press time, Aristide had been removed from office and, according to Estrella, the situation in Ouanaminthe had calmed a bit. "But no one knows who's really in charge now," she said. "We're waiting to see what happens next."

The harrowing situation Estrella and other U.S. missionaries faced in Haiti is one more example of the dangerous climate brewing on today's mission field. While Haiti is not typically overrun with gun-wielding rebels, missionaries in other parts of the world face daily threats of kidnapping and attack.

As a result, Christian terrorism experts are now offering "personal protection training" to missionaries and the organizations and churches who send them. Two such experts—Bob Klamser of Crisis Consulting International in Ventura, Calif., and Randy Spivey of R.S. Consulting in Spokane, agree that everyone from the head of mission agencies to church youth groups going on summer missions trips needs some degree of training.

"If you're an American going into any high-risk area, you've got a bull's-eye on your back. You could be targeted by a terrorist simply because you're an American," said Spivey, who managed hostage survival training for the U.S. Department of Defense in Spokane and now shares that training in seminars for government workers, congressional leaders and their staff, and missionaries.

Klamser, who spent 24 years in law enforcement in Southern California and specialized in hostage negotiation, calls this "the first modern-day season where missionaries are being targeted by terrorists because they're missionaries, because they're Christians and because they're evangelizing," he told Charisma. "Before 9/11, terrorism [targeting] missionaries was usually because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Klamser's organization, launched in 1983, recently held a training seminar at the Wycliffe Bible Translators headquarters in Orlando, Fla. The group of about 50 learned about such issues as risk assessment, evacuation planning and hostage-event management.

Spivey said groups sending missionaries overseas are in dire need of such training, adding that missionaries in Muslim nations are at particular risk. "If you're spreading the gospel in a Muslim country, your risk factor is even higher because there's going to be people not real happy with what you're doing."

Still, despite today's heightened threat of terror, Klamser and Spivey have seen a galvanizing force among U.S. Christians headed for dangerous mission fields. "The current situation with terror threats has actually prompted more people to go to

the mission field,” Klamser said.

“If you feel called to go to places like Colombia or Iraq, I’m not going to tell you not to go,” Spivey added. “But I will tell you to take appropriate precautions and to be prepared for the potential risks.”

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