

17 American Missionaries, Including Children. Kidnapped in Haiti

A group of 17 U.S. missionaries including children was kidnapped by a gang in Haiti on Saturday, according to a voice message sent to various religious missions by an organization with direct knowledge of the incident.

The missionaries were on their way home from building an orphanage, according to a message from Ohio-based Christian Aid Ministries.

"This is a special prayer alert," the one-minute message said. "Pray that the gang members would come to repentance."

The message says the mission's field director is working with the U.S. Embassy, and that the field director's family and one other unidentified man stayed at the ministry's base while everyone else visited the orphanage.

No other details were immediately available.

A U.S. government spokesperson said they were aware of the reports on the kidnapping.

"The welfare and safety of U.S. citizens abroad is one of the highest priorities of the Department of State," the spokesperson said, declining further comment.

Haiti is once again struggling with a spike in gang-related kidnappings that had diminished after President Jovenel Moïse was fatally shot at his private residence on July 7, and following a earthquake that struck southwest Haiti in August and killed more than 2,200 people.

Gangs have demanded ransoms ranging from a couple hundred dollars to more than \$1 million, according to authorities.

Last month, a deacon was killed in front of a church in the capital of Port-au-Prince and his wife kidnapped, one of dozens of people who have been abducted in recent months.

At least 328 kidnapping victims were reported to Haiti's National Police in the first eight months of 2021, compared with a total of 234 for all of 2020, according to a report issued last month by the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti known as BINUH.

Gangs have been accused of kidnapping schoolchildren, doctors, police officers, busloads of passengers and others as they grow more powerful. In April, one gang kidnapped five priests and two nuns, a move that prompted a protest similar to the one organized for this Monday to decry the lack of security in the impoverished country.

"Political turmoil, the surge in gang violence, deteriorating socioeconomic conditions—including food insecurity and malnutrition—all contribute to the worsening of the humanitarian situation," BINUH said in its report. "An overstretched and under-resourced police force alone cannot address the security ills of Haiti."

On Friday, the U.N. Security Council voted unanimously to extend the U.N. political mission in Haiti.

The kidnapping of the missionaries comes just days after high-level U.S. officials visited Haiti and promised more resources for Haiti's National Police, including another \$15 million to help reduce gang violence, which this year has displaced thousands of Haitians who now live in temporary shelters in increasingly unhygienic conditions.

Among those who met with Haiti's police chief was Uzra Zeya, U.S. undersecretary of state for civilian security, democracy and human rights.

"Dismantling violent gangs is vital to Haitian stability and

citizen security," she recently tweeted.{eoa}

AP reporter Evens Sanon in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, contributed to this report.

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