

Mexico Youth Attack Step in the 'Wrong Direction'

A gang of nearly a dozen armed people stormed into a church youth retreat near Mexico City on Saturday and went on an hours-long rampage of beatings, robberies and rape.

Any connection between the gang and the drug cartels is still unconfirmed. However, Mexican authorities say that campers and hikers have been targeted in the past by common criminals, and the region is known for violent drug-related crime.

That said, the attack on children presents a disconcerting change. Tim Glenn with Compassion International says they have several projects in the region between Oaxaca and Mexico City. While none of their sponsored kids were victims of the attack, "I think it's a scary new venture in the active criminal activities. Historically, in the past they left the church alone, they left the kids alone. This new act of violence is a step in the wrong direction."

Because Compassion's Child Development Centers and other projects are in somewhat secluded areas, they do take precautions to prevent such attacks. Glenn explains, "One of the things we require of our church partners is that they have a safe place for kids to go so that they can learn, they can play, they can grow and be away from these type of things in their community."

Ironically, while the Mexico attack is a step in the "wrong direction," Glenn says the exact opposite is happening in nearby El Salvador. The country's two largest street gangs called a truce.

Up until now, the cycle of gang violence made the country the most murderous in the world last year after neighboring Honduras. Glenn says, "Part of that agreement was that they

were going to stay away from the kids, agreeing that they weren't going to try to get kids to join. They were going to stay away from kids as targets of their violence."

Glenn goes on to say, "One of the things that came out of that truce in El Salvador is one of the gang leaders saying that they'd finally come to the realization that 'all we're doing is hurting each other, killing each other, and we're not getting anywhere.'" As a result of the truce, the homicide rate has been cut in half in just four months. In fact, police say the most dramatic change was noted on April 14, a day when El Salvador recorded its first 24 hours without a murder.

Glenn says El Salvador provides a great example that he hopes others will follow. "The sooner the gangs and gang leaders realize the affects they have on their own communities, the safer our own kids will be."

In the meantime, the church needs a lot of prayer in Central and South America where gang activity is on the rise and growing increasingly violent. "Gang activity, sadly, is a reality in a lot of the developing world. Kids who have very little to cling to go to a gang for some source of acceptance and relationship."

But, says Glenn, Compassion International is making a notable difference. Sponsorships help with education and more. The gospel is what transforms the community from within. Getting the gospel to the streets is the hard part. "All we can do is pray for the protection of our kids and communities, and bring our kids to the safe haven of that local church that Compassion partners with."

The church youth group that suffered Saturday's attack has a lot of healing to do emotionally and physically. Glenn urges prayer support for the gospel workers who are on the front lines. "One of the first prayer needs that we have is for the church to be the church in those communities, for the body of

Christ to step up and say, 'We're going to take these kids under our wings. We're going to give them a safe place. We're going to protect them from this type of thing so that they don't have to look to a gang for relationship and acceptance.'

Compassion's work in Mexico began in 1976. There are currently more than 20,500 children participating in 130 child development centers. Compassion partners with churches to help them provide Mexican children with the opportunity to rise above their circumstances and become all God has created them to be.