

Haiti violence drives away foreign missionaries

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An American minister and his companion snatched on their way to church. Franciscan friars abducted on a busy street. A Canadian pastor seized at gunpoint from his rural orphanage.

Missionaries have become prime targets in Haiti, where an upsurge in violence has made their jobs more difficult and dangerous at a time when they are needed most.

Religious workers, mostly Protestant and Roman Catholic, say they are trying to lower their profile in the often-lawless country, cloistering themselves in fortified compounds protected by razor-wire walls and armed guards and going out as little as possible.

Others have decided to stay in their home countries. Several groups said the violence has scared off volunteers who once streamed into Haiti on short-term mission trips to build homes, install plumbing and pass out meals in some of the poorest, most desolate areas of the country.

"It's really shut down the visitors," said Tom Osbeck, of Fort Wayne, Ind., whose Protestant-run Jesus in Haiti Ministry operates a school in a rural town north of the capital. "People are leery of coming. They read about the kidnappings in the news."

There is no official census of foreign religious workers in Haiti, but there are believed to be as many as 1,000 in a country of 8 million that is the poorest in the Western Hemisphere.

Besides seeking converts, missionaries and church groups run a vital network of hospitals, orphanages, schools and food-distribution sites, bolstering Haiti's cash-strapped new government.

URGENT NEEDS

For many Haitians, missionaries fill an urgent need that the weak government simply can't, especially in education. Missionaries run or support 2,000 primary schools attended by 600,000 students -- a third of Haiti's school-age population, said Adriano Gonzalez, the UNICEF representative in Haiti.

"Because of missionaries, half a million children can go to school," Gonzalez said.

But the kidnappings have kept workers away, depriving missions of sorely needed staff, along with the donations they typically bring, said Matthew Marek, Haiti-based director of Norwich Mission House, part of the Connecticut-based Haitian Ministries.

"We've been hit pretty hard financially," said Marek, whose Catholic group welcomed about 200 volunteers a year during calmer times.

Missionaries say they believe they're targeted only because they stand out as foreigners and are more vulnerable than U.N. and foreign embassy personnel, who often travel in armored convoys.

Most of the kidnappings are blamed on well-armed street gangs, which have flourished in the aftermath of the February 2004 revolt that toppled former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

An 8,800-strong U.N. peacekeeping force has stepped up offensives against the gangs but hasn't penetrated most of the dense slums where they operate.

The threat was highlighted last week by the bold, daylight kidnapping of two North Carolina missionaries as they drove to church. Days later, two Franciscan friars, an El Salvadoran and a Haitian, were seized near the airport. All were released unharmed.

The U.S. missionaries spent five days crammed in a sweltering concrete room in a seaside slum, enduring death threats from gun-waving gangsters who demanded hundreds of thousands of dollars in ransom. The sum eventually paid was not disclosed.

"Their guns were loaded, there was one in the chamber and the safety was off," said ex-hostage Tom Barron, of High Point, N.C., recalling one of several times he stared up at a pistol being thrust at him.

DOUBLE JEOPARDY

Daniel Phelsumar, a Haitian-born missionary based in Tampa, arrived last December to deliver supplies to an orphanage. Minutes after leaving the airport, 15 men armed with automatic rifles jumped out and fired on the car, which had a "Jesus Loves You" sticker on the back.

Phelsumar's companion, Canadian missionary Ed Hughes, was wounded and lost an arm in the attack. Then last month, kidnapers struck again and snatched Hughes from his orphanage and held him a week.

Phelsumar was dragged from his car and spent four days in captivity.

Faced with the threats, missionaries are ramping up security, siphoning away resources that could go to development projects.

At the Protestant-run Mission of Hope in rural Titanyen near Port-au-Prince, officials put up a chain-link fence, built a new security post and imposed 24-hour patrols by armed guards after gunmen riding horseback attacked the property in January.

"Things have escalated," said Brad Johnson, president of Mission of Hope, which runs an orphanage, church and several schools. Still, he said his mission has no plans to pull out of the impoverished Caribbean nation.

"The worst thing that could happen is for everyone to leave," said Johnson, of Hope, Ind. "This is when we're needed most."