

**Kidnapping plague adds to misery in Haiti**

By Joseph Guyler Delva

604 words

10 June 2005

04:06 pm

Reuters News

English

(c) 2005 Reuters Limited

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, June 10 (Reuters) - A surge of kidnappings for ransom blamed on slum gangs, police officers and bank tellers is terrorizing Haitians and adding to the woes of a nation grappling with political upheaval and desperate poverty.

Police have seen at least six kidnappings a day recently and the figures could be much higher because many Haitians prefer not to contact authorities, fearing their abducted relatives could be killed. At least 350 people were kidnapped from Feb. 25 to May 31, authorities said.

In the latest case, a mother, father and their three children were snatched from their car by gunmen on Friday in a busy section of Port-au-Prince, the Haitian capital.

Haiti has been roiled by political and gang violence since a bloody rebellion ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in February 2004. The spate of kidnappings comes as thousands of U.N. peacekeepers work with a poorly trained and ill-equipped national police force to contain the violence.

The Caribbean nation of 8 million people is the poorest in the Americas, with most Haitians scraping by on income of a dollar a day.

The kidnapers have set up efficient intelligence networks targeting largely middle-class families and members of the business sector. In some cases, victims say their abductors knew exactly how much money the families would be able to pay.

"A number of bank tellers are part of those criminal networks," said a victim's husband, Mario, who did not want to reveal his last name for security reasons. He said the kidnapers called on the phone and demanded \$40,000.

"When I said we did not have that kind of money, the caller said that I had \$50,000 in the bank and he was right," Mario told Reuters.

Relatives usually choose to negotiate and pay a ransom to kidnapers in exchange for the victims' release.

Gangs from Aristide's slum strongholds, as well as police officers and others considered "respectable" in Haitian society, are behind the abductions, said Jessie Coicou, a spokeswoman for the Haitian National Police.

"There are people of good family and high social level that unfortunately are involved in kidnappings," Coicou said.

DEMAND THAT U.S. HALT DEPORTATIONS

Police Chief Leon Charles has pledged a stepped-up effort to combat what he called a "new plague."

The leader of Haiti's U.S.-backed interim government, Prime Minister Gerard Latortue, blamed the surge in

kidnappings on criminals deported to Haiti by the United States.

"Many of them were not even born in Haiti, but have Haitian parents," said Latortue, who demanded the United States halt the deportations.

The U.S. Embassy's press attache in Port-au-Prince, Caroline Courlay, told Reuters the embassy had no comment.

Some Haitian and U.S. officials have attributed some of the recent violence, including kidnappings, to armed gangs that remain loyal to Aristide and are trying to disrupt national elections scheduled for later this year.

The kidnappings have forced high-profile Haitians to change their routines.

Government officials have reinforced their security, while a growing number of business executives and politicians who never felt the need for special security will not take a step without their bodyguards and are providing security for their wives and children.

Fearing holdups, people hide their money in bras, panties, shoes, socks and hidden pockets. Some once-crowded commercial areas of the capital's downtown are now empty in early afternoon.

HAITI-KIDNAPPINGS|LANGEN|G|RBN|AFA|CSA|LBY|RWSA|RWS|REULB|GNS|RNP|PGE|SXNA

Document LBA0000020050610e16a00237

© 2005 Dow Jones Reuters Business Interactive LLC (trading as Factiva). All rights reserved.