

Tab 91

Chaos engulfs Episcopal bishop in Haiti

24.06.2005

'The situation is very bad. ... I don't see how I can encourage people to come here'

by Alexa Smith

LOUISVILLE -- Slightly more than one year after the ouster of Haiti's president, the only constants on the island are poverty and mayhem.

A Brazilian-led team of 6,000 United Nations peacekeepers is unable to disarm mobs bent on widespread murder, rape, robbery and carjacking -- mobs that now are kidnapping middle- and working-class Haitians and foreign nationals and holding them for ransom.

Government authorities say six to 12 kidnappings occur each day, with ransom demands ranging from \$30 to \$200,000, according to The New York Times.

Human-rights groups say 700 people have been killed in the past eight months -- among them seven peacekeepers.

"The situation is very bad now," says Bishop Jean Zache Duracin, bishop of the Episcopal Church in Haiti (ECH), the largest diocese in the U.S. Episcopal Church. The ECH is the mission partner of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) on this small Caribbean island about 90 minutes southeast of Miami by air.

"It is worse now because of the insecurities," Duracin says. "There are so many cases of kidnapping. We didn't have that before. Now it is added to what we've experienced ... in the past. Things are getting worse day by day."

Duracin has sent the U.S. missionaries there home, and has told the PC(USA) that Presbyterians planning mission trips to Haiti ought to postpone them.

To date, one Episcopal missionary remains on the island. Duracin said he expects that person to leave by month's end. A mission connection conference for U.S. Episcopalians in May was moved for security reasons from Haiti to Miami Beach.

Haiti's chaotic capital, Port-au-Prince, is overrun with hoodlums: Powerful drug traffickers, corrupt former military officers and small-time hooligans who are targeting middle-and-working-class Haitians for kidnapping but sweeping up poor folks, too.

Political gangs in the slums of Port-au-Prince are notoriously vicious, further destabilizing the fragile interim government.

Some of the violence is related to attempts to disrupt Haitian elections scheduled for this fall. Marauding vigilante groups storm through some neighborhoods, hunting down supporters of ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Aristide's toughs have their own gangs in slums such as Cite Soleil and Bel-Air, areas too dangerous for Haiti's poorly trained police to enter.

"When people ask about coming here, I explain the situation," Duracin says by cell phone from the capital. "Even for us who live here, it is terrible. Before we go out, we listen to the news ... (to)

see what the situation is like outside. In some areas of Port-au-Prince, people can't pass, because gangs control the areas. I don't see how I can encourage people to come here."

Those who do journey to Haiti are taking their lives into their hands, the bishop says, emphasizing that outsiders -- presumed to be attached to deeper pockets -- are potential prey.

The New York Times reported this week that shots had been fired at a U.S. Embassy van and that the U.S. State Department had ordered non-essential personnel home. A Canadian development representative was kidnapped in May and released 16 hours later. His abductors used cheap pistols held together with duct tape and had pictures of Aristide taped to their rifles. A French diplomat was killed on the road between Port-au-Prince and Cap-Haitien. An Indian businessman was kidnapped, as was a Russian contractor to the United Nations.

"There's confusion now in the country, among so many armed gangs with weapons," Duracin says. "There's so much confusion that we don't know which group (is doing what) ... and they're kidnapping people from all levels of society."

Duracin, a linguist who has tried to improve Haiti's education system, has been bishop for 12 years. He was consecrated at Holy Trinity Cathedral in downtown Port-au-Prince, less than a mile from the National Palace, the official residence of Haiti's presidents.

Gunshots were heard outside the cathedral last Sunday while more than 300 Episcopalians were inside for worship. A convent next-door -- home to a small order of nuns -- has been abandoned as unsafe.

Social and political unrest has plagued Duracin's ministry, but he says he has never seen anything like the current chaos.

"Now, now it is worse," he says. "It is the worst, now. If it gets worse than this, Haiti will disappear," he says.

The Haitian church has spoken with a strong ecumenical voice, but it is quieter now. It has had little to say since Aristide's departure, aside from calling for peace and urging the government to restore order.

"We spoke so much about the situation ... but people didn't hear," Duracin says, speaking of politicians in particular.

He still has his pulpit.

Earlier this week, Duracin visited Gonaive, an assortment of shantytowns and pothole-filled roads that is one of Haiti's largest cities. To make already miserable matters worse, Gonaive was hard-hit by Hurricane Jeanne last September. "I preached and I said to people: The United Nations can help us. But if we don't organize ourselves, they can't help us. It was an occasion to preach about love. Love is important."

He says he told his listeners that the trinity -- God in three persons -- personifies hope.

"That means for us, even though we are different from one another, we can be one in Jesus Christ and one in the society," he says.

Aristide, a former Catholic priest, was swept into office by a popular movement that deposed 'Baby Doc' Duvalier, who had inherited the resident-dictator's job from his father, known as 'Papa Doc.' The Duvalier clan is one of a series of U.S.-backed repressive regimes in Haiti. Hoped-for reforms under Aristide included raising the minimum wage, redistributing wealth and reducing the army's power by creating a national civilian police force. He achieved only the latter.

His first seven-month administration was overthrown in a military coup, with the help of individuals later alleged to have been on the payroll of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

In 1994, when he was restored to power by the Clinton administration, Aristide banned the Haitian army, but abandoned economic reform and involved Haiti in a controversial World Bank-International Monetary Fund program - which some journalists have said were the price for Aristide's return. His second term was clouded by scandal, corruption and persecution of his opponents and of former friends who criticized his methods.

In February 2004, Aristide was removed from Haiti by U.S. and French forces, in what Aristide called a "modern-day kidnapping."

Duracin isn't sure what the solution is for Haiti, but he wants U.S. churches to urge their government to help. The executive council of the U.S. Episcopal church passed a resolution on June 16 urging the government to "facilitate and support a negotiated peace among the various rival factions" in Haiti.

"I think the U.S. government has traditionally played a big role in the politics of Haiti," Duracin says. "... We need peace. Peace to go to work, to live. We exist now in Haiti. But there is no life."

He finds inspiration in his pastoral visits, although he diligently checks the news before taking to the island's roads, many of which are now unsafe.

"My pastoral visits help me so much," he adds, with a new buoyancy in his voice. "I meet so many people. There is so much suffering here, but people here are happy. They have faith. They dance. They pray. It makes me happy to be among them. It gives me hope."

Copyright © 2002 reformiert online
Stiftung Johannes a Lasco Bibliothek Grosse Kirche Emden
Kirchstrasse 22, 26721 Emden, Deutschland
Telefon: 04921 - 9150 - 0, Telefax: 04921 - 9150 - 50
Internet: <http://www.reformiert-online.net>
Email: fasse@reformiert-online.de