News

A street art vendor In Port-au-Prince, Haiti, prays about a week after the July 7 assassination o

A street art vendor In Port-au-Prince, Haiti, prays about a week after the July 7 assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse. Catholic agencies face enormous challenges in assisting Haitians living amid poverty and social and political turmoil. (CNS/Reuters/Ricardo Arduengo)



by Eduardo Campos Lima

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President Jovenel Moïse's assassination on July 7 was the most visible signal of the social and political turmoil that has been challenging Haiti, long the least developed country in the Americas.

Amid widespread insecurity and a humanitarian crisis caused by poverty, Catholic leaders and agencies are trying to help Haitians and give them a sense of hope. But the difficulties are tremendous.

"Over the past couple of years, the church simply was not able to give any structured response to the people's problems," Holy Cross Fr. Firto Régis, who lives in Carrefour, a town west of capital Port-au-Prince, told NCR.

"There is no time to reflect and propose systemic alternatives," said Régis. "Each new situation is urgent and needs to be immediately addressed."

Indeed, Haitians have been facing crisis after crisis since the 2010 earthquake, which killed some 250,000 people and left more than 1.5 million people homeless. Moïse's last two years in office were especially turbulent, with increasing rates of poverty and violence. The country's GDP contracted by 1.7% in 2019 and by 3.8% in 2020, according to the World Bank.

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Moïse's tenure should have ended in February 2021, but he claimed that the political instability that postponed the beginning of his administration to 2017 gave him one extra year in office.

In January, Moïse dissolved Congress and planned a referendum to change the country's constitution. In February, when he refused to leave office, demonstrations were organized in Port-au-Prince. The protests were repressed by the military, and dozens of people were arrested.

Moïse was allegedly killed by a group of 28 foreign mercenaries. Retired Colombian military officers and two Haitian Americans are part of the accused group. The Florida-based Haitian doctor Christian Emmanuel Sanon was accused by the Haitian police of being one of the masterminds of the crime and was arrested a few days later.

On July 20, Ariel Henry was appointed as prime minister. Elections are scheduled to be held in September.

Haitian Catholic agencies and leaders said that the president's murder has not sparked a popular uprising, as many feared.

"The political crisis has not changed with the killing," said Régis. "People have been silently waiting to know who is behind it. Only when this happens there might be a popular reaction."

But domestic migration has been increasing as many are leaving the cities and moving to the countryside, in an effort to avoid a potential wave of unrest.

The atmosphere of suspension is further intensified by the risk of violence. Several regions of the country are essentially controlled by armed gangs, who kidnap or even kill passers-by.



Holy Cross Fr. Firto Régis works at a school in Carrefour, a town west of capital Port-au-Prince. Talking with students about post-graduate plans are no longer joyful, he said.
"They know that they will face terrible hardships." (Courtesy of Fr. Firto Régis)

"We have been feeling such tension every day," Brazilian-born Sr. Ideneide Rêgo told NCR. A member of the Carmelites of the Divine Providence, Rêgo has been working in Haiti since 2014 as part of the Brazilian bishops' inter-congregational

mission in the country.

She explained that most poor Haitians make their living by selling goods on the street. With the impossibility of going out, they have been severely impacted. "I worked in the past with poor communities in Brazil, but nothing compares to the Haitian reality. It's an indescribable misery," she said.*

Along with another nun, Rêgo works at a Port-au-Prince slum called Corail-Cesselesse, formed by people that had been displaced by the 2010 earthquake.

"More recent residents occupy tin-roofed tents. High temperatures inside are excruciating. There is no water to use or to drink," she said.

Rêgo's mission has been supporting about 300 families. Mothers who cannot feed their babies are part of a nurturing program. Unemployed women attend a program that teaches them to cook, sew, embroider and perform other activities that can generate income. Teenagers are taught arts and crafts, and elderly people have a space to gather during the day.

Rêgo said that she had never experienced so much violence as in the last months of Moïse's administration. "The country is totally controlled by gangs," she said.

"It's a daily effort to show the people that, despite all that, God is walking with us every day," she declared.

Régis, the priest, faces the same kind of dilemma at the school where he works in Carrefour. One of his activities is to speak with teenage students who are about to graduate about their aspirations, their life projects, their mission as citizens and Catholics.

"Those events used to be joyful moments. Over the past couple of years, the atmosphere has changed. They know that they will face terrible hardships," Régis said.

The route from Régis' school in Carrefour to a university in Port-au-Prince has been cut off by gangs. The political instability in the country results in repeated closings of the university, so the number of effective days of study has dropped to only 90. The psychological pressure over the young students is unbearable, Régis said.

"Many of them are traumatized after seeing the victims of kidnapping and murder," he said.



Children eat with their mother in the Brazilian inter-congregational mission in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Residents there live in tin-roofed tents, enduring high temperatures and a lack of water. (Courtesy of Sr. Ideneide Rêgo)

Over the past few months, several people of the school community have been directly or indirectly victimized by the violence. "An 8-year-old student was kidnapped as he was coming to the school. The other children cried all day long. We had to close the school for three days," said Régis.

The Catholic Church has been a frequent target of kidnappers. In the past months, several members of the clergy and nuns have been held hostage.

> 'I worked in the past with poor communities in Brazil, but nothing compares to the Haitian reality. It's an indescribable misery.'
>
> —Sr. Ideneide Rêgo
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Joseph said that activists like himself do not have the means to help the poor, although they would like to do so.

"Small growers have been living in poverty," he said. "Famine is everywhere. They want too much from me, but I cannot really help them."

Haitians living abroad have been following the events with anguish. In Brooklyn, where more than 90,000 Haitians live, people have reacted with great pain to the recent political events, said Fr. Jomanas Eustache, a Haitian living in New York.

"Our families live there, and we know there is violence everywhere," said Eustache, who has been working with Haitians in Brooklyn for about five months. "Nobody can feel in peace about this situation."

In Brazil, which was the destination for at least 130,000 Haitians since 2010, people have been feeling "frustrated" since Moïse's killing, said the Haitian-born Scalabrinian Fr. James-son Mercure, who now lives in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

"People are afraid and want to help their families there. But the economic crisis in Brazil has made things difficult. Newly arrived immigrants are not able to get a job and send money to their relatives," he said.

Many Haitians have been leaving Brazil and trying to get to the United States, where they hope they will have more work opportunities, Mercure added.

"There was a neighborhood in Porto Alegre that used to concentrate many Haitians. Now it is rare to see one," he said.

Eustache said he hoped Catholics agencies in Haiti might help the people not become disheartened — or give up.

"Haiti is the country of hope," he said. "We will never lose that, no matter what."



Carmelite Sr. Ideneide Rêgo, pictured here with children in Port-au-Prince, has been working in Haiti since 2014 as part of the Brazilian bishops' inter-congregational mission in the country. (Courtesy of Sr. Ideneide Rêgo)

**Due to an editing error, several paragraphs in this story were left out during its initial publication. We regret the error.*

A version of this story appeared in the **Aug 20-Sept 2, 2021** print issue under the headline: Catholic agencies face difficulties in Haiti.