A disaster response trailer sits outside the home office of Christian Aid Ministries in Millersbur

A disaster response trailer sits outside the home office of Christian Aid Ministries in Millersburg, Ohio, Oct. 17, 2021. (CNS photo/Aaron Josefczyk, Reuters)

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As Christian missionaries and family members, some as young as 8 months old, were still being held for ransom in Haiti by a gang notorious for group kidnappings, other charities and religious groups examined how they can remain safe while delivering humanitarian aid.

Seventeen members of Christian Aid Ministries, based in Millersburg, Ohio, were kidnapped Oct. 16. The 400 Mawozo, which is considered in control of Croix-des-Bouquets and the surrounding area where the abductions occurred, claimed credit for the kidnapping and is demanding a $17 million ransom — $1 million per person.

The Ohio group was grabbed after their visit to an orphanage in Croix-des-Bouquets, a northeast suburb of Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince.

In April, five priests and two nuns were abducted in that same area, and released after 20 days when ransoms were paid. Christian Aid Ministries is connected to Amish and Mennonite groups in the United States.

"This is the worst Haiti has been for a long time," Miami Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski told The Tablet, the newspaper of the Diocese of Brooklyn, New York. "It's hard to see when it turns around. You think once it hits bottom it would start going on the uptick, but every time we think we hit bottom we find out that bottom is even deeper."

AVSI, a nonprofit humanitarian relief and development organization based in Milan, Italy, which bills its mission as being based on Catholic social teaching, has had about 300 people in Haiti to address basic needs for food and shelter following the Aug. 14 earthquake there, and also to assist victims of urban violence.

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Fiammetta Cappellini, the organization's Haiti representative, told Catholic News Service that precautions they take for their people range "from reducing travel to stopping any travel during sensitive time slots."

"We have a curfew at 8 p.m. because most kidnappings took place a few months ago after dark. We can also limit the movements in some regions of the city that are particularly exposed," she said.

But Cappellini acknowledged, "It is impossible to reduce the risk of kidnappings to zero. The phenomenon is so vast and affects such diversified segments of the population. For example, there have been kidnappings of women in the market with minimal sources of income so that it can affect anyone."

"What is certain is that statistically, the kidnappings are mainly aimed at the wealthiest population and are concentrated in certain areas at crucial time slots," she said. "It does not happen exclusively then and there, but it is more frequent."

The work itself, she said, "explicitly provides the best protection for this phenomenon because we build excellent relations with the community. If we build the best possible relationships, our presence will be considered an added value. It becomes a relationship in which the community understands our work, respects us

and in some ways protects us."

Of the Oct. 16 kidnappings, Cappellini called them "so upsetting because I'm sure these missionaries certainly have an excellent relationship with the community, so when the gangs kidnap those helping their communities, it destabilizes all of us and worries us a lot."

Should kidnappings become more frequent, she said she expected her organization would be forced to suspend its Haiti operations.

In an Oct. 19 statement released to the media, Christian Aid Ministries said those who were abducted included five men and seven women ranging in age range from 18 to 48 and five children, ages 8 months, 3, 6, 13 and 15.

A White House spokeswoman said Oct. 18 the FBI was working with the U.S. diplomatic team in Haiti in to locate the missionary group and get them freed.