A demonstrator shouts at police during protests demanding that the government of Haitian P

A demonstrator shouts at police during protests demanding that the government of Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry do more to address gang violence, including constant kidnappings, in Port-au-Prince March 29. (CNS/Reuters/Ralph Tedy Erol)



by Catholic News Service

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Editor's note: *This story has been clarified and updated with a new statement from Haiti's Jesuits.*

A coalition of religious nongovernmental organizations with consultative status at the United Nations has written to U.N. officials, asking them to address the reign of terror of armed gangs in Haiti that they described as "diabolical, frightening and unacceptable."

The same gangs are responsible for nearly four kidnappings a day in 2022 and violence that killed more than 200 and forced 3,000 to flee their homes during July alone.

In an Aug. 4 letter to Najat Maalla M'jid, U.N. special rapporteur on violence against children, and 29 other U.N. officials — special rapporteurs and representatives — the Justice Coalition of Religious urged the international community "to respond swiftly

and effectively to the atrocities occurring in Haiti."

The letter and accompanying testimonies were not made public, but copies were obtained by Catholic News Service. In one testimony, Passionist Fr. Rick Frechette, a doctor in Port-au-Prince, described the situation on the streets of Port-au-Prince as "Somalia-type battles."

The coalition letter noted that the "Haitian state has failed in its sovereign obligation to protect the population."

In a follow-up letter with Catholic News Service, Annemarie O'Connor, representing the coalition, noted that the coalition was not diverging from a late-July statement from the Haitian bishops' conference, which said state authority must be restored and that the government must take immediate action to "disarm the gangs, to allow the police to tackle violent crime and create a climate of serenity and confidence."

"We agree that authority must be restored and that gangs must be disarmed. Indeed, we cited the arms flow coming into Haiti, and the co-responsibility of the international community to curtail it. Our letter urged the U.N. to respond to support Haiti in this time of crisis. Our sense is that a Haiti-alone solution is not possible," O'Connor wrote.

In a phone conversation with Catholic News Service, she emphasized the justice coalition was not seek military intervention.

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In a separate statement issued Aug. 12 and published on AlterPresse, an alternative information network made up of experience Haitian journalists, the Jesuits of Haiti called on the international community to use a new approach to come to the aid of the imperiled Caribbean nation with "scrupulous respect for the sovereignty of the Haitian state."

The statement, signed by Jesuit Fr. Jean Denis Saint-Félix, superior of the Jesuits in Haiti, described the Haitian government as "completely incapable of fulfilling the basic functions it is accorded by the constitution."

"An ultimate solution must necessarily be brought about by the serious and sincere engagement of the international community," the letter said.

Citing a "real link" between gang leaders responsible for the violence racking the country and the government, as well as political and business sectors, the statement described the Haitian National Police as "dysfunctional" and "eaten by corruption" with "more than 15% of its members working with armed gangs."

The Haitian National Police was created in 1995 and has since then received training from U.N. police, until the departure of the last U.N. mission in 2019.

The Jesuits said the international community must urgently work with the Haitian National Police to disband and neutralize the criminal gangs terrorizing the country and restructure and reform the same police force.

A new approach must be "relatively long-term" and propose structural state reforms, including national dialogue, judicial reform and an electoral council and must address constitutional issues. It must facilitate a government capable of leading such efforts for reform, the Jesuits said.

The calls from the bishops and religious came after a month of violence in Port-au-Prince in which a 10-day battle between two armed gangs in the populous slum of Cité Soleil killed 209 people and forced 3,000 to flee their homes. On July 24, a police inspector was killed in front of the congregation during a Sunday service at a Protestant church in Croix-des-Bouquets, taking the number of officers killed in 2022 to more than 30.

On July 27, the Catholic cathedral in Port-au-Prince was set on fire during a turf war between two gangs; firefighters were able to extinguish the fire before it did major damage.

Gangs also were responsible for arson attacks on courthouses in Port-au-Prince and Croix-des-Bouquets; files and pieces of evidence were burned.

Frechette said he had spent the past two weeks "on my belly in Cité Soleil and at the burned cathedral."

"It is way past obvious that there is no state," he wrote. The priest said there is a "a civil war in the clothing of gang wars" and wrote the gangs are "sponsored by politicians, the government and other actors."

The Justice Coalition of Religious described the July 16 U.N. Security Council unanimous vote to extend the mandate of a small U.N. political mission in the country as "nowhere near what Haiti needs from the U.N. to enhance the protection of lives and human rights of Haitians." It called a vote to ban small weapon sales to Haiti "insufficient."

The situation has taken a toll on the activities of the religious orders in Haiti. The Sisters of Charity of St. Elizabeth, working near Croix-des-Bouquets, reported that, because of the violence, they lost $250,000 in funding for new projects that would have protected women and children and reduced child trafficking; investors considered the situation too risky.

"When you leave your home, you take your life in your hands and carry a coffin on your shoulder," said one team member, when describing the state of constant fear for their lives.

Croix-des-Bouquets is the area where 17 North American missionaries were kidnapped in 2021 and held for two months by the notorious Mawozo gang.

The Sisters of Charity of St. Elizabeth reported that the headmaster of the school run by the order was kidnapped recently by a gang. The headmaster, known as Pastor Cesar, was released when one of the kidnappers, a former pupil at the school, recognized him and told the others that the pastor does a lot of good in the community. The pastor, who lives in Croix-des-Bouquets, is worried he will be kidnapped again.

The same school offers a free medical clinic for children and local residents, but the doctor no longer comes to the school because he fears being kidnapped and held for ransom. The doctor now sees patients on Zoom when there is electricity, and the nurse resident on the school property distributes prescribed medicine.

"Nearly all Haitians are asking why the international community does not come to their assistance," the Justice Coalition of Religious wrote in the open letter. "We implore you to listen to the cry of the people of Haiti," expressed in the testimonies sent by some religious working in that country.