

Efforts to free missionaries in Haiti continue

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People protest in Titanyen, Haiti, on October 19, carrying a banner with a message in Creole that reads: "No to kidnappings! No to violence against women! Long live Christian Aid Ministries!" (AP Photo/Joseph Odelyn)

Efforts to win the return of 17 members of a US-based missionary group and a local driver stretched on in late October, as a violent gang demanded \$1 million ransom per person.

The individuals kidnapped on October 16 included five children age eight months to 15 years, although authorities were not clear whether the ransom demand included them, a top Haitian official said. Sixteen of the abductees are Americans, and one is Canadian.

The Ohio-based Christian Aid Ministries said it would hold a day of fasting and prayer for its missionaries.

“We, along with government authorities, continue to work hard to bring them home safely,” the conservative Anabaptist group said. “This time of difficulty reminds us of the ongoing suffering of millions of Haitians. While our workers chose to serve in Haiti, our Haitian friends endure crisis after crisis, continual violence, and economic hardship.”

The FBI and other US agencies are “part of a coordinated US government effort” to free the missionaries, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said on October 19.

A wave of kidnappings has added to the other miseries besetting the Caribbean nation.

At least 119 people were kidnapped in Haiti in the first half of October, according to the Center for Analysis and Research in Human Rights, a Haitian nonprofit group. The rash of kidnappings led to a strike on October 18 that shuttered businesses, schools, and public transportation—a new blow to Haiti’s economy.

Life was largely back to normal within two days, but unions and other groups vowed to organize another strike, and sporadic protests erupted on October 20 in Port-au-Prince over the lack of fuel, with gangs blamed for blocking gas distribution terminals.

Dozens of moto taxi drivers zoomed around one Delmas neighborhood, setting barricades of tires on fire and throwing rocks across roads to block them.

“We want gas for work! If we don’t find gas, we’re going to shut down the country completely!” they yelled. “[Prime Minister] Ariel Henry, if he cannot run the country, he must go!”

Similar protests erupted the day before.

In a more peaceful demonstration north of Port-au-Prince, dozens of people walked through the streets of Titanyen demanding the release of the missionaries. Some carried signs that read “Free the Americans” and “No to kidnapping!” and explained that the missionaries helped pay bills and build roads and schools.

“They do a lot for us,” said Beatrice Jean.

One protest took place near the prime minister's residence, where police fired tear gas to disperse a crowd demanding fuel.

The kidnapping was the largest of its kind reported in recent years. Haitian gangs have grown more brazen as the country tries to recover from the July 7 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse and the August 14 earthquake that killed more than 2,200 people.

Christian Aid Ministries said the kidnapped group included six women, six men, and five children. A sign on the door at the organization's headquarters in Berlin, Ohio, said it was closed due to the kidnapping situation.

News of the kidnappings spread swiftly in and around Holmes County, Ohio, hub of one of the largest populations of Amish and conservative Mennonites in the United States, said Marcus Yoder, executive director of the Amish and Mennonite Heritage Center in nearby Millersburg, Ohio.

Christian Aid Ministries is supported by conservative Mennonite, Amish, and related groups that are part of the Anabaptist tradition.

The organization was founded in the early 1980s and began working in Haiti later that decade, said Steven Nolt, professor of history and Anabaptist studies at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. The group has year-round mission staff in Haiti and several other countries, he said, and it ships religious, educational, and medical supplies throughout the world.—Associated Press