

Haiti turmoil has impact on East Tennessee ministries

Impoverished nation dealing with president's assassination, violence, and protests in the streets

By Catholic News Service

Bishop Alphonse Quesnel of Fort Liberté, Haiti, said the Haitian Catholic Church was "stunned" by the assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse.

"We bishops must not only call for calm, but also for all Haitians to sit down together, change the way they look at each other, and seek together the way forward," the bishop told Vatican News just after the Haitian president was gunned down by assailants in the bedroom of his residence on the outskirts of the capital city Port-Au-Prince in the early morning hours of July 7.

His wife, Martine Moïse, was injured in the attack. The Associated Press reported she was in stable condition after she was flown to a trauma center in Miami.

Bishop Quesnel said the assassination presents an opportunity for a "change of mentality" and a "real conversion."

The last assassination of a Haitian president took place in 1915 and led to a 19-year occupation by U.S. troops. But the bishop said there had been several warning signs that a similar tragedy could occur and described the previous months as "chaotic" ones that



Upheaval in Haiti Haitian President Jovenel Moïse is pictured in a Jan. 11, 2020, photo. The president was assassinated in an attack in the early hours of July 7 at his home outside of the capital, Port-au-Prince. His wife also was shot in the attack.

called for prudence and careful judgment.

Tensions had been building in the Caribbean nation for several months, Bishop Quesnel said, with the rise of violent activities of armed gangs that United Nations sources say have displaced almost 15,000 people from poor neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince. Human rights organizations say

these armed gangs are linked to different politicians, including the executive government.

Kidnappings for ransom by these gangs have skyrocketed in recent months, with 91 people documented kidnapped in April alone. Among them were seven priests, including two French nationals abducted in broad daylight as they drove in a convoy to the

ordination of a new priest.

The takeover by gangs of the poor neighborhood of Martissant, situated on the road that leads to southern Haiti, has more or less cut off half of the country from the capital. On July 4, six people, including two U.S. Protestant missionaries, were killed when a small plane crashed while flying from Port-au-Prince to the southeastern city of Jacmel, in an attempt to avoid Martissant.

President Moïse had been ruling by decree since January 2020, when the terms of most senators and deputies ended. In a June statement, the bishops' conference opposed an unpopular general referendum called by President Moïse. The bishops said such a referendum would be impossible in the current context of paralyzing crime and extreme sociopolitical unrest.

"When one holds the reins of power, a certain measure of flexibility and humility is necessary," Bishop Quesnel reflected, echoing a broad range of civil society groups that compared the Moïse government to a dictatorship. "To exercise power in this day and age

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Sacred Heart among Diocese of Knoxville congregations continuing aid to strife-stricken country

By Bill Brewer

Despite the nearly paralyzing political and social turmoil taking place in Haiti, important work is continuing to take place through the hands of faith-based groups and their members within the Caribbean country and via U.S. churches like the Cathedral of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The cathedral parish's Haiti Outreach Program is actively supporting its ministry to the impoverished country amid tumultuous recent events.

In fact, cathedral rector Father David Boettner was joined by Haiti Outreach Program leaders Matt Webster and Dr. Dean Mire on Aug. 5 in a meeting in Miami with Bishop Désinord Jean of the Haitian Diocese of Hinche and Father Michele

Lamarre, pastor of St. Michel Parish in Boucan-Carré, Haiti, to map out strategy on the best way to keep resources flowing to Boucan-Carré and its rural communities like Bouly amid the political and civil strife.

Mr. Webster explained that members of Sacred Heart's Haiti Outreach Program, with few exceptions, have not traveled to Haiti for three to four years because of safety and

security risks.

And the United States currently has placed restrictions on travel to Haiti. According to the U.S. State Department, residents are advised to not travel to Haiti at this time because of crime, kidnapping, civil unrest, and COVID-19.

But that doesn't halt the need, which continues unabated. And critical work

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National crisis doesn't deter Diocese of Knoxville parishioners from helping Haiti

Water is flowing again in Bouly with help from a village...and a few donkeys

By Hiske Jones

Grit, determination, human and animal power, along with financial help from the Haiti Outreach Program have paid off, and the Haiti village of Bouly now has a working cistern again, providing life-saving water to the medical clinic and for use by residents.

Bouly is accessible only by hiking five to six hours over mountainous terrain from Boucan-Carré in Central Haiti, including crossing a river seven times without bridges. This trek is arduous on its own, so imagine it while carrying rebar, lumber, and other building materials.

"The tremendous effort to rebuild the cistern was truly made possible by raw human labor performed by several dozen people, with no machines or bulldozers," said Billy Stair, a longtime volunteer with the Knoxville Haiti Outreach Program.

Mr. Stair and Dr. Dean Mire traveled to Bouly last September and were told by the clinic staff that the cistern, originally built by the French in 2013, was leaking badly, was beyond repair, and would not last much longer. In addition, the pipes that bring the water in from a spring were leaking in several locations and no longer had the pressure necessary to fill the cistern.

"The cistern greatly cuts down the amount of time needed to collect water from the river and represented a tremendous leap forward in the basic quality of life for the residents and is an important source of water for the staff and patients at the clinic," Mr. Stair said. "It was critical that we find a way to rebuild it."

Given the importance of clean water to the clinic's staff and patients, the Haiti Outreach Program agreed to provide the funds for a new cistern. In the planning process, instead of rebuilding the old cistern, a new larger cistern was designed about 20 meters from where the original cistern was located.

The materials were purchased in Port-au-Prince (Haiti's capital, about two hours away), taken by vehicles to Boucan-Carré. Then the materials were transported by donkeys and about 40 Haitians over the mountain to Bouly. Sand for the cement was gathered at the river by women and children and hauled in buckets to the construction site. A foundation for the cistern and trenches for the pipes were dug by hand.

Julio Geffard served as the project manager, who oversaw all aspects of the project and reported back on the progress.

"Julio has been an integral part of our team," said Matt Webster, who leads the Haiti Outreach Program. "With our support via scholarships, he finished high school, went on to law school, and has returned to Boucan-Carré to teach and support us with various requests."

One challenge was to balance security for the clinic with accessibility to the water for the village. The novel design involved using a fence that circles the clinic to bisect the cistern, with a spigot on the inside of the fence and another on the outside.

"This solution makes it possible to lock up the clinic grounds at night while providing access to water for residents," Mr. Stair said.

Funds also were provided to build a smaller cistern by the spring that captures water during the rainy season and stores it for use during the dry months of summer and fall.

The Haiti Outreach Program is currently planning for a medical mission as soon as travel is allowed. Political and civil strife in Haiti have halted on-site mission work by the outreach program.

"We are increasing our outreach to doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals as well as planning a fun fundraising event in early October," said Mr. Webster, the program's chairman. "There are so many professionals with a heart to give back and remote areas like Bouly could really use the help."

To volunteer, donate, or learn more about how to help, visit <https://haitioutreachprogram.org> or email mattwebster@haitioutreachprogram.org. ■



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is ongoing to help the Haitian people in the interior communities of Boucan-Carré and the even more remote Bouly thanks to generous donors to programs like the Haiti Outreach Program, according to Mr. Webster.

"It's really frustrating. We need to be communicating with our sisters and brothers in Haiti on a more personal level than just on WhatsApp," Mr. Webster said.

Because of that lack of detailed communication, the meeting in Miami was scheduled.

"We want to have a crystal-clear line of sight of what the (strategic) plan is. We went to Miami to meet with Father Lamarre, the Boucan-Carré priest, and the bishop of the Diocese of Hinche to find out what is the future of capital investment in Haiti. What are the priorities? There

is interest in building a new church in Boucan-Carré to replace an aging one," Mr. Webster said, adding that the Haiti Outreach Program already has helped fund and build a rectory and schools for St. Michel Parish.

"What is most important? Is it a new church? Is it security? Is it technology? Is it a convent for the sisters there? This was a strategy meeting in which we wanted to get aligned on priorities," Mr. Webster added. "With the Bishop of Hinche and his pastoral plan, with the priest and his parish, with the Sisters and their school, and with the doctor and his clinic, we can determine the needs."

Donors to the Haiti Outreach Program and similar Haiti mission programs at diocesan parishes like Immaculate Conception, St. Mary in Johnson City, St. Augustine, and St. Francis of Assisi in Fairfield Glade fund vital

Haitian operations such as two Catholic schools in Boucan-Carré, parish needs, and a medical clinic in Bouly, which has a Haitian physician and medical staff to serve the rural people of the area.

"The fundamental driver here is our donors. They give very generously and we want them to know where their money is going and how it is used," Mr. Webster noted, pointing out that the depositing of wire funds is very secure, as is the withdrawal process in Haiti.

"It's for food. It's for clothing. It's for water. Their situation is dire. This is a daily 'wake up and am I going to survive today' situation for them. Our donations help pay for teachers to educate Haitian students, books, tuition, uniforms, and food for these young students, a clinic, clinic staff, and medical supplies for these remote people," Mr. Webster continued.

He estimated that over the 20-year history of Sacred Heart's Haiti Outreach Program, about \$5 million has been raised by donors.

"What has been achieved there has been spectacular. We've changed the local economy in Boucan-Carré. The Haiti effort has made it a better place by funding a bridge over the river, two schools, a church and rectory, and a medical clinic in Bouly. It's made an economic difference there," Mr. Webster said.

He acknowledged that it may be a while before Sacred Heart missionaries can return to Haiti, but the long-term plan is to get back there.

"The need is as urgent now as it has ever been because of the political climate. We have high expectations that we are all aligned, us and Haiti working together on behalf of our dedicated donors," he concluded. ■

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means to let go of rigid positions and to listen closely and attentively to other parties."

"The bishops' conference now has an important role to play in the instillation of Gospel values, so that people can learn to look at each other face to face and see the nation," Bishop Quesnel said. "Otherwise, we are going to continue to be stuck in this situation."

The assassination sent shockwaves through the country.

Fiammetta Cappellini, Haiti country representative for the Milan-based AVSI, said on the afternoon of July 7 "the country has come to a stop. Traffic has been halted and the borders are closed. Nobody is leaving their homes."

She, too, cited recent instability due to violence from armed gangs.

"The opposition to this president was very strong," Cappellini said. "As a humanitarian NGO, we are very concerned about the population, especially those who live in the most vulnerable neighborhoods and areas. In these areas, a large part of the population depends on humanitarian aid, which is now suspended, and we do not know when the organizations will be able to continue their operations because we must be able to guarantee the safety of our staff before resuming activities."

"Nou Pap Domi" (We Never Sleep), a citizen watchdog group that has campaigned against corruption and called for Moïse to step down, condemned the assassination and offered condolences to his family.

"We note that blood just never stops flowing in this country. No one, no sector of society is spared from such assassinations," the group said. "We are sending out an SOS to protect life and to protest against the disregard for human life in Haiti. We cannot continue to count bodies every day. Impunity must end, every murder victim must find justice, and those guilty must go to prison."

"We must come together and allow the country to breathe. Too much blood has flowed," the group said.

According to news reports, several suspects in President Moïse's assassination were killed by police and other suspects were arrested in the hours following the assassination.

Jovenel Moïse was thrust into power as Haiti's president when he was sworn in on Feb. 7, 2017. He was a 48-year-old businessman reportedly with limited political experience.

Political and social turmoil in the country has prompted the United States to grant to Haitians with a special immigration status an extension so they can continue to live and work legally in the United States, or apply to do so.

On May 22, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced it was granting a new 18-month extension of Temporary Protected Status to allow Haitian nationals and "individuals without nationality who last resided in Haiti" the opportunity to file an application. The Department of Human Ser-

vices said Haitians currently residing in the United States as of May 21 can file initial applications for TPS, so long as they meet eligibility requirements.

TPS grants a work permit and reprieve from deportation to certain people whose countries have experienced natural disasters, armed conflicts, or exceptional situations so they can remain temporarily in the United States.

"Haiti is currently experiencing serious security concerns, social unrest, an increase in human rights abuses, crippling poverty, and lack of basic resources, which are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic," said DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas in a statement announcing the extension.

"After careful consideration, we determined that we must do what we can to support Haitian nationals in the United States until conditions in Haiti improve so they may safely return home," he said. Catholic organizations hailed the decision, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. On May 24, the chairmen of the USCCB's committees on migration and international justice and peace issued a joint statement.

Auxiliary Bishop Mario E. Dorsonville of Washington, D.C., chairman of the Committee on Migration, and Bishop David J. Malloy of Rockford, Ill., chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, said the decision "acknowledges the serious challenges facing the island nation, including widespread violence, civil unrest, political instability, and food insecurity," as Haiti is widely recognized as the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

"The Church in Haiti has been directly impacted by the unprecedented levels of gang activity — with targeted kidnappings of clergy, religious, and laypersons in recent months — adding to the need for an urgent response," the bishops said months ago.

"We stand with our brother bishops in condemning the lawlessness, and we join them in their solidarity with victims," they said. "We urge the Haitian government and President (Jovenel) Moïse to act in the best interests of the Haitian people by respecting and upholding their rights and dignity."

"We also call on the Biden administration to address the desperate conditions plaguing the country through diplomatic and humanitarian measures."

The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, also in a May 24 statement, said that as the organization's missionaries have witnessed the crises in Haiti unfold, Haitians deserved the legal protection granted.

"This decision will give a pathway for vulnerable Haitians to seek refuge in the United States while their nation seeks to heal from the multiple crises it is facing, including the ongoing global pandemic," said Susan Gunn, director of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.

She said missionaries have accompanied Haitian families affected by the "protests, economic disrupt-

tion, school closings, roadblocks, violence and increasing poverty that have intensified in the last year."

"Many Haitians are indeed fleeing for their lives, and it is our moral duty to welcome them. We commend the Biden administration for moving forward with a redesignation of TPS for Haitians in the United States," she said.

Anna Gallagher, executive director of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc., also commended the decision.

"Haiti is currently facing increasingly dismal country conditions, including widespread violence, displacement, human rights violations, and kidnappings," she said in a May 24 statement.

"Protecting people from being returned to these conditions is exactly why Congress created TPS," Gallagher said. "The decision is not only correct under the law, but also under morality and our duty to each other as human beings."

Serious social unrest enveloped Port-au-Prince in October 2019, leading to days of paralysis and prompting the Haitian bishops' justice and peace commission to call on President Jovenel Moïse to step down.

Going a step further than the bishops, who squarely laid the blame for the current chaos on the government and elected officials in September 2020, the justice and peace commission said, "A change in head of state is crucial as is a change in the way the authorities govern the country."

Haitian leaders, it said, are "digging the people into a deeper ditch with no way out."

Haiti has been embroiled in a deepening crisis as a movement to demand accountability for government corruption scandals turned into a broad popular insurrection

to oust the president and put an end to the misuse of state funds.

Last October, sporadic demonstrations continued in the streets of Port-au-Prince, often put down by heavily armed police SWAT units; most Haitians remained at home for fear of violence. Some ventured out to search for gas, which was scarce, as the government's failure to pay fuel bills has had gas suppliers reluctant to deliver to Haiti. Some schools remained closed, and hospitals were barely able to function, for lack of electricity or gas to supply generators. Demonstrators blocked roads to stop traffic circulating. A ceremony to mark the opening of the judicial year on Oct. 7 was canceled as demonstrators threatened to stop the activity.

The justice and peace commission described Haitian leaders as "indifferent to the situation of misery (the people) live in." People are unable to eat, it said, because of the high cost of basic products. Since early 2018, inflation has risen by nearly 50 percent, from 13 percent to 19 percent, and the local currency, the gourde, has fallen from 65 to the U.S. dollar to 95.

The commission described Haitians as "unemployed people in a place where there are no jobs, or exploited without access to a fair wage, a people who lack the means to pay for the education of their children, a people without access to health care because of its high costs."

Apart from living in poverty, Haitians are denied their most basic civil rights, the commission said: "The people get no justice from the state when their rights are violated, they cannot circulate freely without being victims of murder, armed robbery, rape, or theft, they cannot demonstrate for their rights without being victims of police shootings." ■



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