

It has been a month since 16 Americans and a Canadian were kidnapped in Haiti.

Miami Herald

BY JACQUELINE CHARLES UPDATED NOVEMBER 16, 2021 2:28 PM



a U.S.-based religious organization whose missionaries were kidnapped in Haiti after being ambushed by an armed gang on the eastern outskirts of the country's capital is asking for prayers as its workers and their relatives remain captive. It has been a month since the 16 Americans and a Canadian national were kidnapped at gunpoint in the rural community of Ganthier, near Croix-des-Bouquets, after visiting an orphanage on Oct. 16. They are part of the Mennonite community, which through their charity, Ohio-based Christian Aid Ministries, provides assistance in education, healthcare and Bible teaching in areas throughout Haiti. In light of a surge in kidnappings and a gang-aggravated fuel crisis in the impoverished country, the U.S. and Canadian embassies have asked their nationals to depart the country. "Pray that God would touch the hearts of the kidnappers and draw them to Himself," Christian Aid Ministries, or CAM, said in its latest update on the situation. The group of 17 includes five children, the youngest of which is 8 months old. They were abducted on Oct. 16 by members of a notorious street gang, 400 Mawozo. The gang controls the communes of Croix-des-Bouquets, Thomazeau and Tabarre as well as a part of Pétion-Ville. It is known for mass abductions and has a track record of targeting religious groups. Its last high-profile kidnapping involved five priests, two nuns and two other people, the last of whom was freed on their 20th day captivity. The attack happened when the Catholic clergy were on their way to the installation of a new parish priest.

In a statement on its website, Christian Aid Ministries, which continues to shun interviews since its missionaries were taken, called for "patience and prayer." "Pray for endurance for the hostages as they face day after day in captivity. Ask God to protect them and encourage them. Pray especially for the children who are being held, that they would sense God's presence," the charity said. "Ask God to give courage to the families of the hostages as they

await news about their loved ones. Their trust in God has been a powerful testimony of God's faithfulness." Neither the Haitian authorities nor the Federal Bureau of Investigation have said much about the hostages, whose lives have been threatened by one of the gang's leaders, Wilson Joseph, known as Lanmò Sanjou, who said, "death doesn't know which day it's coming." In a widely circulated video after the abduction, Joseph threatened to "put a bullet" in the hostages' heads if his ransom demand of \$17 million, or \$1 million per person, was not paid. "Many people, including CAM management and government authorities, are working diligently to bring our loved ones home safely. We are grateful for the assistance of those knowledgeable and experienced in dealing with kidnapping cases," the aid group said. According to the Center for Analysis and Research in Human Rights in Port-au-Prince, at least 803 people have been abducted between January and October of this year, including at least 54 foreigners. Gédéon Jean, the director of the center, said his group is conducting its own investigation into the missionaries' kidnapping. One question they are seeking an answer to is whether it was only 17 foreigners who were kidnapped.

"In general, missionaries have a Haitian driver, and they usually have someone translating for them," Jean said. "When we were alerted about the kidnapping, we were told that the gang had kidnapped foreigners and Haitians. So we are asking if there isn't at least one Haitian in the group." Jean said his research into Haiti's kidnapping pandemic has revealed that Americans have not been spared. "In one year, they kidnapped 60 Americans," he said. "There is a practice of kidnapping Americans in Haiti." One well-known case happened more than 40 years ago on Jan. 23, 1973, and involved the U.S. Ambassador at the time, Clinton E. Knox, and Consul General Ward L. Christensen. Both were held at gunpoint for almost 20 hours inside Knox's Port-au-Prince residence. They were freed in exchange for the release of 12 Haitian prisoners, a ransom of \$70,000 and safe passage to Mexico for the kidnappers, two gunmen and a woman, and the prisoners. The negotiations were conducted personally by Haiti's president, Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, who at the time was just 21 years old. A State Department spokesman at the time said that the kidnappers had asked for "\$500,000," which the U.S. flatly turned down. He also said the payment was not made by the U.S. government. Jean said decades later Americans are still being kidnapped, and later freed — but only after a ransom is paid in the vast number of cases.

"Despite the fact there has been a huge mobilization on the part of the Americans with the FBI coming to Haiti and specialists on hostages, up until now, a month later, there is still no information being given and they have not been freed," Jean said of the missionaries. "We are continuing to do our own investigation to see what is the reason they have not been liberated. Is it because they are looking for a way to pay the kidnappers and they have not yet found it? Is it the amount they are seeking to reduce so they can pay it, or is it because the U.S. said publicly they don't negotiate with terrorists? We don't know."



The Christian Aid Ministries headquarters in Berlin, Ohio, is closed Monday, Oct. 18, 2021, due to kidnappings in Haiti. U.S. officials are working with Haitian authorities to try to secure the release of 12 adults and five children with a U.S.-based missionary group who were abducted over the weekend by a gang notorious for killings, kidnappings and extortion. JULIE CARR SMYTH AP