17 American and Canadian missionaries kidnapped by gang members in Haiti

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<https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/17/americas/haiti-american-missionary-kidnap-intl-hnk/index.html>

Seventeen missionaries from the United States and Canada, some of them minors, were kidnapped in [Haiti](https://edition.cnn.com/2021/07/01/americas/haiti-violence-death-june-intl-latam/index.html) on Saturday, according to the organization Christian Aid Ministries.

"The group of sixteen US citizens and one Canadian citizen includes five men, seven women, and five children," read [a statement](https://christianaidministries.org/updates/haiti-staff-abduction/) released by the Ohio-based organization Sunday.

"We are seeking God's direction for a resolution, and authorities are seeking ways to help," they said.

An investigation is ongoing, according to a source in Haiti's security forces, who attributed the kidnapping to local gang members. Haitian officials are in touch with the US State Department about the kidnapping, the country's foreign minister, Claude Joseph, told CNN.

The missionaries were traveling by vehicle Saturday to Titanyen, north of the capital Port-au-Prince, after visiting an orphanage in the Croix des Bouquets area. They were abducted along the route between the two places.

Dan Hooley, a former field director for Christian Aid Ministries in Haiti, told CNN on Sunday that all of the kidnapped missionaries are believed to have been in one vehicle, and that some were able to contact the organization's local director before they were taken.

The kidnappers have already made contact with the organization, he also said.

"A couple of fellows right away messaged the director and told him what was going on. And one of them was able to drop a pin, and that's the last thing [the organization] heard until the kidnappers contacted them later in the day," Hooley said.

One of the abducted missionaries, an American citizen, also posted a call for help in a WhatsApp group as the kidnapping was occurring, The Washington Post reported, quoting a person familiar with the abduction who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

"Please pray for us!! We are being held hostage, they kidnapped our driver. Pray pray pray. We don't know where they are taking us," the message said.

It is unclear whether the message was a video or a text sent to the WhatsApp group, and there is no information on the WhatsApp group itself in the Washington Post's reporting.

CNN cannot independently verify the authenticity of this message or the report.

A spokesperson for the US State Department said late Saturday it was aware of the reports, and that "the welfare and safety of US citizens abroad is one of the highest priorities of the Department of State."

According to a senior US official familiar with the situation, the FBI and State Department officials are working around the clock to secure the release of Americans, but so far do not know the current location of the kidnapped missionaries.

Canadian officials are also working with local authorities and "implicated NGOs" to gather information, a spokeswoman for Global Affairs Canada told CNN.

CNN has reached out to the Haitian Justice Ministry and the National Police but they have not yet commented.

### 'They knew the dangers that they were in'

Kidnappings have surged in Haiti throughout 2021, with numbers rising nearly 300% since July.

At least 628 kidnappings have taken place since January, of which 29 are of foreigners, according to data released earlier this month by the Center for Analysis and Research in Human Rights (CARDH), a non-profit based in Port-au-Prince.

The rise in kidnappings in Haiti is largely due to the gang 400 Mawozo, which controls much of Croix des Bouquets and even taxes local businesses, according to CARDH.

The gang, once notorious for car theft, has pioneered "collective" kidnappings of large groups of victims from buses and cars, the report says. 400 Mawozo typically demands ransoms of around $20,000 USD, it also says.

While the Christian Aid Ministries community is reeling from the news, Hooley said that its members in Haiti would have been cognizant of the risks they were taking.

"These are very dedicated people, people that have risked their lives, they knew the dangers that they were in, or at least were aware of what could happen, I'm sure," he said.

He knows several of the victims personally, he also said. "Two of them are single fellas. One was down there for a while, the other one is a friend of ours who just flew in on Friday, and was planning to help out with the Haiti earthquake, the situation down there in the south."

"And then there's a young couple there — a young couple with two children that were also abducted. We lived with her (the mother) in Oregon, and knew her family very well," Hooley said.

Kidnapping in Haiti is often indiscriminate, with even the poor targeted. Several kidnapping victims and their families previously told CNN that they were still working to pay off debts, after borrowing money from friends, employers and even banks to pay ransoms.

In a case that has become notorious across the country even amid this year's hundreds of kidnappings, a 5-year-old girl was reportedly found dead early this year with signs of strangulation. Her mother, a peanut vendor, told Reuters she had been unable to come up with the equivalent of $4,000 for ransom.

Just before the missionaries' abduction, a Haitian transportation union had called for an indefinite strike starting Monday to protest the spike in kidnappings, among other issues.

"We call on the government to put an end to the kidnappings and provide us safety or for them to resign immediately. We are the most victims; the transportation sector is an easy target for kidnappers all over the country," Méhu Changeux, president of the Association of Owners and Drivers of Haiti, told CNN on Sunday.

"We lost many members to the insecurity and dozens of members have been kidnapped. The latest tragedy of the kidnapping of the American missionaries shows no one is safe in this country," Changeux said.

### Turbulent year

On Friday, the UN Security Council voted to extend the mandate of the UN mission in Haiti by nine months, until July 15, 2022.

At the UNSC meeting Friday, US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said, "As we all know, the past year has been especially turbulent in Haiti. By renewing the mandate of BINUH (the UN mission in Haiti), we have helped to ensure the UN can continue its vital efforts to support democratic institutions and planning for elections, strengthen the rule of law and promote stability."

Haitian Foreign Minister Claude Joseph had urged the UNSC earlier this month to bolster the UN mission's mandate in order to help ensure security and protection for civilians, according to a [UN news release](https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14652.doc.htm).

"These are the legitimate expectations of the people who have suffered enough from gang violence, kidnapping and widespread crime," Joseph said.