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It has been over 2 years since I have been able to go to Haiti. Thanks to WhatsApp I can text and talk with friends in Haiti occasionally. With everything being in such short supply, including power to charge cell phones, these communications are really important to them and me. I would like to be able to tell you that things are improving but that is not the case. It is with great sadness that I share this information about what is happening in Haiti now.

Let me quickly review how these gangs became so strong. Historically, politicians, political parties, business persons, some wealthy people, towns, cities, land owners, etc., have formed, trained, and paid groups of men to defend their interests. These groups eventually turned into gangs. Some of these gangs are no longer doing the bidding of a few rich or powerful persons but are acting on their own to gain as much power and wealth as they can. It is estimated that there are 200 gangs operating in Haiti now with at least 95 in Port au Prince (PaP) and the surrounding area today. International meddling in Haiti has hurt more than helped. Many of the guns used by the gangsters originated in the U.S.

Gang violence has not abated over the past 3 years. Port au Prince remains the center of much of their violence and has spread to many areas outside the center of the capital city. The gangs seem to be either fighting with the police; fighting with other gangs for territory; or forcing people from their homes and after stealing whatever they want often burning the huts down. Another weapon used to spread fear to the population is sexual violence against women and girls.

Now let me tell you as much as I can about the lives of the Little Sisters and my other friends living in Haiti these days.

The Sisters' mission within PaP is Faustin. It was destroyed by the 2010 earthquake and several people lost their lives there. The Dominican Sisters of San Rafael donated money to build a wall around the property so that the land could be saved for future rebuilding. This place is very important to the Little Sisters because it provides a safe haven for those in PaP when violence erupts. It is also a place where Sisters can stay after receiving medical attention when that is possible. They have finally completed most of the house (it only took 14 yrs). It is still too dangerous for the sisters to stay there full time, but when it is safe enough to be on the streets they go there during the day to work but not after dark. When they have the funds to hire people for security and other workers, they will be able to reopen this mission.

The next closest mission to PaP is Brochette. Two gangs are fighting with each other there. The Sisters are staying within their wall and barbed wire has been added on top of it. Last week, a Sister walked out of her room and heard something and turned around to see that a bullet had come through her window opening. Last year gangsters broke in here and kidnapped 2 sisters. After a time, they were released. The addition to the height of the wall and the wire have helped the Sisters living and working here feel a little safer, but the sound of gunfire is still very unsettling and of course no one can go out at those times.

Riviere Froide is next when going southwest of PaP. This is one of their largest missions with the Motherhouse, Sisters' Infirmary, morning and afternoon Elementary Schools, Secondary School, Professional School, and Church. All of these are within a wall. About that wall, one of the first projects we took on when I first came to Haiti in 2000 was to finish building that wall. It was finally finished in December of 2009. The earthquake took much of it down in January 2010. Only within the last few years was it refinished and I think razor wire and broken glass has been added to the top. Outside the wall is a clinic. There was also an orphanage for handicapped children. Much of this program was suspended about 2 yrs. ago because the Sisters were not able to feed all the children. Those with families returned to them. One Sister remained there with the children who have nowhere to go. The Gangsters broke in here and stole everything of any value. The children and the Sister were not harmed, but the building is no longer useable. For quite a few weeks now there has been much gunfire on the road in Riviere Froide. Gangs are fighting each other and the police. The sound of gunfire has been very hard on the Sisters in the Infirmary. The Sisters in the

Motherhouse are so sad that they cannot do their work. The schools have had to close as well as the Church and Clinic. The school children and church goers cannot go outside of their huts and walk on the roads.

Still in Riviere Froide but outside the mission walls, many hundreds of people live in small houses. There are a few schools, churches of various denominations including voodoo. This is usually a bustling place, with people selling small items along the road, but now everyone is taking shelter inside. You might remember Derival Merant, the young man who was one of our first scholarship students and who is also a stone sculptor. He lives in Riviere Froide. When I met Derival in 2000 his house was falling into the river. Over the next few years with money from the sale of his sculptures in the US, some donations, and a lot of hard work by Derival, he had a new house up away from the river. Fifteen members from his family and adopted children plus his own 2 are living there. He told me that at night they have to sleep under their beds or tables. This is because the roof is made from corrugated metal and they fear that the bullets will rain down on them. Derival has been putting on two programs for some of the children of Riviere Froide. A project to teach them arts and crafts in the summer and a Christmas party giving a little meal. He said he saw how the children seemed sad and he had to do something to try to bring joy back into their lives. Two US architects and a few others have been helping to fund part of these efforts. Last Christmas, Derival said that he ran out of food but the children who just got a bottle of water were still smiling. Derival has now had to move out of his house because there was too much gunfire and he and his family are sheltering in a house in Carrefour that is in a safer place.

As of this moment, most of the other 35+ missions of the Little Sisters scattered throughout other areas of Haiti are still in operation. When gangs pass through their area, everything stops and people try to stay inside. When the gangs leave, people try to resume as much of their lives as possible. Five Sisters have died in the last few months. I think one or two of them might have passed away even in better times, but the other three would still be working hard if all the gang violence were not happening. I think they died because they had no access to medical attention and very little food. You can multiply this story by the hundreds of many Haitians (especially the ill, young, and old). We will never know how many have died because of these violent times.

I know the situation sounds horrid, but knowing that people like the Sisters, Derival, and many other Haitians are trying to do their best to stay alive and help Haiti return to the safe, productive, joyful place it can be. Donations are down for them and I can understand that. The world economy is difficult and some people think Haiti is a lost cause. I am writing to tell you that this is not the case. We do have a way to get donations through safely to the Little Sisters. The Loretto Community safely saves the money until it is sent to the bank in Haiti. They only go out to get funds from the bank when it is safe enough to do so.

Yes, my heart is heavy with what is happening in Haiti today. I understand that I would make things much worse if I went there now, so I continue to do what I can from here in the US. They are so very grateful to everyone who has continued to believe in them and support them with funds and prayers. A few things are clear to me: Most of the Haitians are good hard-working citizens; education is still a key to solving many of their problems; all of our lives are made better when we take the time to learn about other people and cultures. Thank you for continuing your interest in the Haitians. Please know that they pray for you daily.

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