

Haitian National Police patrol outside the College Marie-Anne in Port-au-Prince Jan. 22, 2024, days after six nuns were kidnapped by armed men while sisters were traveling on a bus. The nuns, who have since been freed, were abducted, along with other passengers on a bus, are members of the Sisters of St. Anne, the congregation that runs the college. (OSV News/Reuters/Ralph Tedy Erol)

by OSV News

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Port-au-Prince, Haiti — January 25, 2024

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The six nuns kidnapped in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Jan. 19 have been freed, and the archbishop of the capital was overjoyed and thankful at the news.

"We give thanks to God! Thank you for your support," Archbishop Max Leroys Mésidor of Port-au-Prince, president of the bishops' conference in Haiti, told Vatican News Jan. 25, the day their release was announced. He thanked all those who had "paid attention" and "offered support," the Vatican media service said.

Released with the sisters were those who were with them on the bus and the driver. The release followed the pope's Jan. 21 appeal for the release of the sisters and for "social harmony" on the troubled island.

The Latin American bishops' council, CELAM, had announced Jan. 24 as a day of prayer for the release of the nuns, who are members of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Anne. CELAM includes the Caribbean bishops.

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The women, along with other passengers were abducted by armed men while traveling on a bus in Port-au-Prince, according to the Haitian Conference of Religious. It is not clear who was responsible for the kidnapping, but it was suspected that it was the work of a gang.

"These many kidnappings fill the consecrated people of Haiti with sadness and fear," said the statement, signed by the conference's president, Fr. Morachel Bonhomme.

Pope Francis Jan. 21 appealed for the release of all the hostages, while praying for "social harmony" in the country. In remarks after the Angelus, he said he had "learned with sorrow the news of the kidnapping" of the sisters and the others. "I call on everyone to stop the violence, which causes so much suffering to that dear population."

Gangs control 80% of the capital. The location where the kidnapping took place is controlled by the Grand Ravine and Village de Dieu gangs. For some years now, the kidnapping of clergy by gangs has become a common occurrence.

Appeals for the sister's freedom came from many corners of the globe. CELAM's bishops, in a letter to the archbishop of Port-au-Prince, said Jan. 23 that "it is with great consternation and sadness that we are closely following the latest events in Haiti, especially the kidnapping of eight people on Jan. 19, among them six sisters," Latin American bishops said in a letter signed by Archbishop Jaime Spengler of Porto Alegre, Brazil, CELAM's president, as well as the organization's secretary-general, Auxiliary Bishop Lizardo Estrada Herrera of Cuzco, Peru.

"We wish to express our closeness to them, particularly to their families and communities, reminding them that they are not alone in this request for liberation as well as in the daily struggles for the liberation of the Haitian people," the bishops said.

In 2023, armed groups were accused of killing 4,000 Haitians and of carrying out at least 3,000 kidnappings. That's an increase of 80% over the previous year. The country is in chaos, marked also by sometimes violent protests demanding the removal from office of Prime Minister Ariel Henry. The price of basic goods has jumped by 23%, reported the U.N.'s World Food Program. Since December, the price of vegetable oil has risen 66%.

"Priests and religious are risking their lives in serving the poorest and most vulnerable people in Haiti," said Edward Clancy, director of outreach of Aid to the Church in Need USA, based in Brooklyn, New York. "Their courage is an expression of Christian charity. It is an abomination that gangs target them for kidnapping."