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Children at a school run by the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, are seen in an undated photograph. As the growing violence in Haiti directly impacts more and more children and teenagers, Catholic missionaries struggle to offer safe havens to regain hope and dreams of a better future. (OSV News/courtesy Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus)



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As the growing violence in Haiti directly impacts more and more children and teenagers, Catholic missionaries struggle to offer safe havens to regain hope and dreams of a better future.

According to the United Nations Children's Fund, known as UNICEF, sexual violence against minors grew 1,000% between 2023 and 2024 — "a staggering" number, UNICEF spokesman James Elder said Feb. 7.

"Almost equally staggering is how little coverage this gruesome statistic has received. And so, if numbers have lost meaning, perhaps the children living this horror will count," he cried out during a press conference at the Palais des Nations in Geneva as he recalled the story of 16-year-old Rosalyn, kidnapped and sexually exploited for a month until the gang kidnappers realized that there was no one to pay her ransom and let her go.

She is now under the care of the "UNICEF-supported safe house with more than a dozen other girls, all receiving care," Elder said.

Only in 2024, the recruitment of kids by armed groups increased 70%. More than 1 million children live under the continual threat of violence. Half a million minors have been displaced by violence and 3 million will require urgent humanitarian assistance this year, with 300,000 out of school due to violence, displacement and school closures, UNICEF said.

"Over the past decade or so, life has been a living hell for the kids, especially for the poorest ones," Father Gilbert Peltrop, secretary general of the Conference of Religious of Haiti, told OSV News. He added that extreme poverty and the state's inaction were the major reasons for the situation's degradation.

Both the bishops' conference and the Conference of Religious of Haiti have continually denounced such degradation, Peltrop added. Missionaries face extremely dangerous situations in order to keep accompanying families and children, something that shows that they have not been completely abandoned.

"Minors are especially vulnerable to joining gangs, something that psychologically tortures us, given that those kids have a dark future ahead of them — if they have any kind of future," Peltrop lamented.

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UNICEF estimates that 85% of the capital is now controlled by armed groups. With violence on the rise and threat to the lives of missionaries, many Catholic congregations have decided to leave Haiti. The Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus decided to stay however, no matter what difficulties they would face in the future.

"We couldn't leave them in the moment they most need us to stay," Sister Helia Sange Moreira, a Brazilian-born member of the Apostles, told OSV News.

Along with four other Brazilian sisters and four Haitian ones, Sister Helia works in the congregation's school, kept in the Santo 9 neighborhood. About 270 children frequent the institution.

"They are directly affected by the atmosphere. Even if they don't suffer physical violence, they feel it," she described.

Many students tell the nuns about the shots they hear in the night, the threats they receive and the overall insecurity.

"Even their games with one another are violent. Violence forms their consciousness," Sister Helia said.

She also pointed out that more and more children have been losing their parents — either because they were killed or they had to move to another province or country in order to work.

"Those kids are terribly sensitive. They come to us for emotional support, for a hug. Missionaries who come from other countries are seen by them as a special reason for hope — hope of school opportunities, of having food to eat during lunch," she added.

The Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus also created a program for unemployed women to teach them cosmetology. They offer computer classes for the whole community and activities to improve the self-esteem of elderly citizens.

"I think many Catholic groups have been trying to work like that with vulnerable social sectors, especially the children. The church has limits to deal with such problems, but it's making great efforts," Sister Helia added.

She has been living in Haiti since 2021. In 2024, she and her colleagues were kept from leaving their house for three months due to the criminal turmoil in the city.

"We needed to stay here and show the children that we must unite and struggle together for a better world. Only that way will they be able to develop new life strategies," said Sister Helia.