

# 'There's nobody free from the risk.' Kidnappings and violence threaten humanitarian work in Haiti.

The fate of New Hampshire native Alix Dorsainvil and her child remains uncertain

By [Brian MacQuarrie](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 4, 2023, 5:19 p.m.



A parent, carrying his child after picking him up from school, ran past police carrying out an operation against gangs in the Bel-Air area of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on March 3. ODELYN JOSEPH/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The brazen kidnapping in Haiti last week of a New Hampshire native and her daughter, held by gang members for \$1 million in ransom, has brought new, startled attention here to the

tragedy unfolding in that impoverished Caribbean country.

But for New England's humanitarian organizations working in Haiti, the July 27 kidnapping of the community health nurse and her child is a familiar, and horrific, story that plagues ordinary Haitians every day — and often goes underreported outside the country.

Haitian authorities reported an unprecedented 2,094 homicides as well as 1,014 kidnappings from January through June, primarily committed by gangs in the Port-au-Prince area, according to a United Nations report. An additional 160,000 Haitians were driven from their neighborhoods by fear and force from January through mid-March, the UN reported.

Schools have closed, often for lengthy periods. And some humanitarian groups have scaled back their life-sustaining efforts. The crisis has hit particularly hard in Greater Boston, home to the third-largest concentration of Haitians in the United States.



Children waited to be seen by mobile health doctors, at a shelter for people displaced by gang violence, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, May 30. ARIANA CUBILLOS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

“This cuts across all spectrums. There’s nobody free from the risk,” said Dr. Louise Ivers, an infectious disease specialist at Massachusetts General Hospital and executive director of its Center for Global Health. “It’s absolutely heartbreaking.”

Ivers said the country’s deteriorating security situation, which has led to an escalating humanitarian crisis, is the worst she has seen in the 20 years she has worked in Haiti.

“The doctors and the nurses and the community health workers are under serious duress there,” Ivers said. “It’s not even safe to go out, but they do.”

Friends and colleagues say “it can’t get any worse, and then it does,” she said, with violence affecting “Haitians just going about their everyday lives — vendors or bankers or teachers, whatever the case might be.”



Nertil Marcelin, leader of a community group, distributed machetes to residents in an initiative to resist gangs seeking to take control of their neighborhood, in the Delmas district of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, May 13. ODELYN JOSEPH/ASSOCIATED PRESS

“I have to be very careful myself,” Ivers said. “When I’m on social media, you wouldn’t know if I were there or not there.”

For Build Health International, a Beverly-based humanitarian organization that designs and develops medical facilities in Haiti, the pervasive lawlessness since the 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse has disrupted the organization's in-country supply routes, led to beefed-up security, and driven up the cost of equipment and materials.

"We're really being very careful and calculated in how we move around the country in terms of both staff and resources," said Sarah Sceery, the humanitarian group's deputy director for partnerships and administration. "We've had to become innovative in new ways."

The fear of being stopped by gangs has led to longer, more challenging routes just to move supplies from place to place, Sceery said. Transporting more materials by water instead of land is another option for Build Health International, which collaborates with Boston-area organizations such as Health Equity International and Partners in Health, whose work brings medical care to areas of extreme poverty in Haiti.

"It's a challenge and a frustration because our team is really working hard to deliver equitable and quality health care," Sceery said.

Build Health International currently is working to expand a solar-power system at the national teaching hospital it built in Mirebalais, a facility operated by Partners in Health. A diagnostic center also being built there will offer the country's first public CT scan capability, she said.

"We have no intention of scaling back or stopping our work in Haiti," Sceery said.

Such work has become much more difficult over the past two years as gangs, who use ransom to finance their criminal operations, control large swaths of Port-au-Prince, and the police and military seem unable or unwilling to confront them.

Concerns are rising among humanitarian groups that donations could dwindle because of the violence.

Since Dorsainvil's kidnapping, the State Department has ordered nonessential embassy personnel and their families to evacuate. Department officials also have advised Americans

to leave the country as soon as possible.



A woman reacted during a press conference to demand the freedom of New Hampshire nurse Alix Dorsainvil and her daughter, who have been reported kidnapped, in the Cite Soleil neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Aug. 3. ODELYN JOSEPH/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Early this year, the UN said rampant violence had “severely hampered” access to health care in Haiti. And last month, Doctors Without Borders suspended services at one of its hospitals after 20 armed men kidnapped a patient from an operating room.

The country of 11.5 million people suffered a major cholera outbreak last fall, with 4,000 deaths and 60,000 cases of a disease that is both preventable and treatable. Hit hard by COVID-19, Haiti also has seen a dramatic rise in the cost of living and food.

Such was the backdrop to the kidnapping of Dorsainvil, a 31-year-old graduate of Regis College in Weston, while she was working at El Roi Haiti, a humanitarian organization founded by her husband, Sandro Dorsainvil. American authorities are working behind the scenes to free Alix Dorsainvil and her daughter.

President Reese Grondin of The Haitian Project, a Rhode Island-based organization, said crime is so pervasive that all of the 360 students at its Catholic boarding school outside Port-au-Prince have been affected by violence.



Alix Dorsainvil (right) posed with her husband, Sandro Dorsainvil. UNCREDITED/ASSOCIATED PRESS

“Every single person has experienced the impact of the gang activity and the insecurity. Someone they know has been kidnapped or displaced,” said Grondin, whose organization operates the tuition-free Louverture Cleary School for students 11 to 19 years old.

“I cannot underscore how broadly people are impacted in the Port-au-Prince area. The kidnappings and sexual violence, it’s very hard to wrap our head around,” Grondin said.

Students now occasionally remain at school through the weekend, when they would normally return home, because their families have been displaced by violence, Grondin said. Staff sometimes stay, as well.

“There has been more on-campus living because it’s dangerous to go back and forth,” Grondin said. “There have been a couple of times, for prudence sake, that we have halted operations for a week or so.”

The school is adding a counselor to work directly with students who have been exposed to violence in their neighborhoods. The students’ mental health is receiving more attention, and they are being coached on coping with the added stress.

“It is very difficult,” Grondin said. “They’re young. They see a lot of things at home and outside of school that young people shouldn’t have to deal with.”

The Dorsainvil kidnapping is distressing, Grondin said, but such incidents have become a staple of life in Haiti.

“I cannot say enough how often it happens — not just daily but hourly. It’s a way of making a living that the gangs are perpetrating constantly,” she said. “The instability of the political situation has allowed or created a vacuum where the gangs have so much power.”

However, Grondin said, The Haitian Project “is in this for the long haul. People who believe in education as an equalizer and as a path forward, they’ll always believe in what we’re doing.”

The Haitian Project is building a second school as part of a planned 10-school network, according to Colby Bowker, the group’s vice president.

“This is not really the time to step back,” Bowker said, “especially for programs that provide alternative pathways to youth. It’s crucial right now.”

*Correspondent Ellie Wolfe contributed to this report.*

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