

Unrest in Haiti delays return of youth mission to Baltimore Archdiocese

Unrest in Haiti has delayed the return home of a mission trip from the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

The archdiocesan Missions Office sponsored the trip for volunteers aged 16-20. Nine youths and several adult chaperones traveled to the Caribbean nation July 1 and were to return to the U.S. July 7. Their return is now scheduled for July 11.

They are on a mission to St. Marc, a two-hour drive north of the capital city of Port-au-Prince. The mission is being led by Rachel Barron Bowles, a program assistant with the Missions Office. Their initial flight home July 7 was canceled, and an attempt to get to the airport in Port-au-Prince July 9 was disrupted.

The mission's chaperones include Steve Anderson, a human resources manager with the archdiocese. The archdiocesan Department of Communications shared an email from Anderson, who said that its motor entourage was forced by a "hostile group" to turn around on its way to Port-au-Prince and return to St. Marc July 9.

As of July 8, according to Catholic News Service, four people had been killed over three days of protests against a steep hike in fuel prices imposed by the government of Haiti, the most impoverished nation in the Western Hemisphere.

The unrest included a strike by taxi drivers, which has since been called off. Multiple news agencies reported that calm had returned to most of Port-au-Prince by the evening of July 9.

Until that calm was restored, the U.S. Embassy was instructing Americans to "shelter in place." The mission's members were doing that in St. Marc, the hometown of Deacon Rodrigue Mortel, who began the Baltimore Archdiocese's partnership with the Diocese of Gonaïves in 1997.

“We are all OK and in touch with the embassy,” the July 9 email from Anderson read. “We are blessed to have food, shelter and water.”

The Baltimore Haiti partnership includes more than 20 sister parishes in the archdiocese supporting nearly 50 parochial schools. It includes five schools that are operated by the Mortel High Hopes for Haiti Foundation. Four of the schools, including Les Bons Samaritans Primary School, are in St. Marc.

Youth volunteers stay in a residence at the school, part of a gated compound that has 24-hour security on site, as well as its own power source. Mission volunteers help run a summer camp at the school in the morning, and visit rural parishes in the afternoon.

“The city (St. Marc) itself is a safe city,” Deacon Mortel said. “You can walk the town, day or night, with no problem, even during the time when there was violence in Port-au-Prince and Cap-Haïtien.”

Deacon Mortel, director emeritus of the Baltimore Haiti project, maintains a residence alongside the school. He spoke to the Catholic Review while at the Catholic Center in Baltimore.

“The only problem was, the road (to Port-au-Prince) was blocked in various small towns,” he said. “Those roadblocks have been cleared as of this morning (July 10). We know that because Rachel (Bowles) saw buses from Port-au-Prince pass through St. Marc. That would indicate the roads are open again.”

Bowles’ experience in Haiti includes being among the student volunteers on the archdiocese’s initial youth mission there, in 2003. According to Deacon Mortel, the chaperones also include Ann Cory, a Theology teacher at Maryvale Preparatory School in Lutherville.

“The most powerful thing one can do for Haiti and the safety of the group is prayer,” Deacon Mortel said. “We ask everyone to continue to pray for the safe return of all involved.”

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