

With help from American priest, four Haiti gang leaders have called a truce. Can it last?

BY JACQUELINE CHARLES UPDATED JULY 14, 2023 1:56 PM

For three years now, rival gangs in Haiti have turned the country's poorest and most densely populated slum into one of the biggest battlegrounds, where women and girls are raped and people carrying out their daily activities are indiscriminately shot at by armed men firing from rooftops. Now it seems that even the armed groups are tired of the mayhem and want peace. Four rival gang leaders, whose alliances and violent turf wars have led to mass incidents of murder, gang rape and sniper attacks in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Port-au-Prince's Cité Soleil slum since 2020, are engaged in peace talks and have committed themselves to end the violence. Father Tom Hagan, a well-known American Roman Catholic priest and humanitarian, confirmed to the Miami Herald that he is behind the initiative. Hagan said that gang leaders known as "Gabriel," "Mathias," "Iska" and "Barbecue" have indeed signed a document that among other things, says, "We promise our loving God to work hard to end violence, to bring peace to all people.

"They're not saying, 'We're going to stop shooting or we're going to stop doing this,' " Hagan, 81, said. "But they are saying, they are more for peace and forgiveness" Still, even without an explicit agreement to lay down their arms, the gangs have initiated a ceasefire in recent days that has led to the dismantling of a wall that separated rival territories and has given children the confidence to go outside again to play. "People were out at the wharf Cité Soleil 25. People were swimming [and] there is no shooting," Hagan, known as "Father Tom," said Wednesday, describing it as "a great day." "People seem to really pick up...they seemed so happy." "People have a little bit of hope now," he added.

Hagan is among several Roman Catholic priests and pastors who have stuck it out in the community despite the danger and the killings. In addition to providing Haitians with free schooling, Hands Together, which is operated by Haitians, provides food and medical care through a mobile health clinic. For weeks now Hagan has been meeting with the gang leaders, trying to broker an agreement. So far, he's gotten them to sign the document drawn up on his stationary belonging

to Hands Together, Hagan's charity. Written in English and Creole, it places God at the center and has the leaders pleading to make "every effort to provide security for all our children and all of our elderly." Hagan concedes that while he believes he's been able to make the inroads because the gang leaders "trust me and they have confidence in me," there is only so much that he can do. Now would be the moment, he said, for some well-known and respected figure, whether Haitian or in the U.S., to step in and guide the process. "We need someone who maybe would have a stronger presence," he said. There have been rumors about peace talks among gang leaders for weeks, although there have also been suspicions about the gangs' intentions, since none has actually laid down arms. Hagan said he doesn't know of any other group involved. He said he has been able to build on an agreement the leaders had among themselves not to engage in violence between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. He also said he believes the gangs are tired, and see that the fighting is taking its toll. "There's not a day that goes by where I don't meet with each of them and, as far as I know, this little grain started with us," he said. "They depend on us; we have the schools and our schools are the only ones that have stayed open."

In its latest report to the United Nations Security Council, the U.N. Integrated Office in Haiti said that gangs operating in Port-au-Prince and the Artibonite Valley region are the main perpetrators behind the country's 68% rise in homicides between January and June of this year. This includes the increased severity of attacks in Brooklyn, which has become ground zero in the escalating clashes and attacks by gangs against the population, and the resurgence of cholera. One attack in April led to the rapes of at least 49 women, the U.N. office said. The rapes occurred in an area known as "Dèyè Mi," an open space that separates neighborhoods controlled by rival gangs. Seven of the rape victims were killed afterwards, their bodies left on the streets. "Trapped by the violence, civilians in areas under gang control are unable to leave their homes and lack access to food, water, sanitation and healthcare Services," the U.N. office said. On Friday the U.N. Security Council unanimously agreed to extend the mandate of its political office in Haiti until July 15, 2024. Member countries highlighted the deteriorating security and human rights environment and requested that the office's police and corrections unit include up to 70 civilian and specialists to serve as police advisers. The office is also being asked to scale up its strategic and advisory support to the

training and investigation capacities of the Haiti National Police to help address sexual and gender-based violence. The U.N. office is also being asked to do more to assist Haitian authorities in the protection of children. Hagan, who founded Hands Together, a charity that provides humanitarian aid, said he doesn't ever remember it being this bad. His first trip to Haiti was in 1985 while he was the chaplain at Princeton University. After the visit, he founded his charity with college students. The charity runs 20 free schools across Haiti, half of them in Cité Soleil. "It's 100 times worse than the earthquake," Hagan said, referring to the magnitude 7 tremor that nearly destroyed Port-au-Prince and killed over 300,000 dead in 2010. "This has been very, very bad," Hagan said, recalling how in the early days of the fighting violence was even being directed at school principals in the area. "To get students shot and killed, and even teachers, it's been very depressing, very frustrating." "The people living in Cité Soleil right now are the poorest of the poor," Hagan added "They can't leave, they have nowhere else to go. They have no other option." He acknowledged the current truce is "very fragile" and that he was surprised that some gang leaders agreed to sign. This includes Gabriel Jean-Pierre, alias "Ti-Gabriel. The leader of the the coalition of armed gangs known as "G-pèp-la," Jean-Pierre has been the main rival to Jimmy "Barbecue" Chérizier, the former cop-turned-gang leader who operates the G-9 federation. Another rival is Iscard Andrice, alias "Iska," who blames the G-pèp leader for killing his mother, and runs a gang in the area known as Belekou. All three signed the document, along with another gang figure, Mathias Saintil, who controls the area known as Boston. Mathias and Iscard are aligned with the G-9 federation. The violence dates back as far as 2020 when, according to a report from the National Human Rights Defense Network, all roads into Brooklyn were cut and Gabriel found himself under attack by Iska and Mathias. The result was a massacre that led to the deaths of least 145 people; 28 others were injured and 18 women and girls were gang raped. "In addition, 104 houses were set on fire," the human rights report said. Pierre Esperance, the head of the National Human Rights Network, said that since May his organization has seen a disturbing surge in acts of violence and kidnappings, carried out by armed groups, including allies of some of the gang members who signed for peace. This includes Vitel'homme Innocent, head of the Kraze Barye gang, who is wanted by the FBI for his alleged role in the kidnappings of American and Canadian missionaries and who controls the area the U.S. Embassy in Tabarre. It also includes the head of the Izo 5 Segond

gang operating out of nearby Village de Dieu at the southern edge of the capital. “I salute the initiative and the decision by the gangs not to shoot at one another; it means for now we have a pause in massacres,” Esperance said. “But it doesn’t mean the wars are over because every year they agree to a pause, but they keep their guns and soon they restart the shooting again.” Hagan said he used to think that the fierce fighting among the gangs was over territory and for control of voting blocs in the next elections. But as the fighting has continued and the violence worsened, he’s not so sure anymore. “It almost seems like it’s personal now,” he said. “If somebody gets shot on one side, then there is a shooting on the other.”

This story was originally published July 14, 2023, 10:20 AM. JACQUELINE CHARLES 305-376-2616 Jacqueline Charles has reported on Haiti and the English-speaking Caribbean for the Miami Herald for over a decade. A Pulitzer Prize finalist for her coverage of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, she was awarded a 2018 Maria Moors Cabot Prize — the most prestigious award for coverage of the Americas.

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