

Listening : Haitian church keeps hope alive amid violence, poverty

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Bishops Julio Holguin of the Dominican Republic, Wilfrido Ramos-Orench of Connecticut and Jean Zache Duracin of Haiti in conversation at the Executive Council meeting in Des Moines, Iowa, January 8-12, 2006. (ENS Photo by the Rev. Cynthia Black)

[Epicopal News Service] Haiti is hampered by widespread escalating violence and political instability, Bishop Jean Zache Duracin told the Executive Council during its meeting in Des Moines, Iowa, on January 11, but the Episcopal Church in Haiti -- one of the U.S.-based Episcopal Church's 12 overseas dioceses -- is strong.

The past three years have been filled with murders and kidnappings and the "population is terrorized by armed gangs," Duracin said. Much of the capital of Port au-Prince is under the control of armed gangs, he said.

More than 1,600 people were murdered between March 2004 and November 2005 according to one source, he said. There is an average of 40 kidnappings a week and people possess more than 170,000 illegal small arms.

According to reports, the Haitian police registered at least 27 murders and 43 kidnappings in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area between December 12 and January 3.

In the midst of this recurring and worsening violence, Duracin said, there has been no socio-economic progress and there is "endemic" weakness in the country's infrastructure. There is no good system of agricultural development. The per-capita income is \$440 and the inflation rate is 20 percent. The unemployment rate is 80 percent. More than 55 percent of the population is illiterate. "We don't have enough schools," he said, but the church tries to fill that gap and has some of the best schools in the country.

About 42 percent of children younger than five years are malnourished, according to Duracin. "And the health-care system is very bad," Duracin said. There is only one doctor for every 10,000 people. There were 18,000 new cases of AIDS recorded in 2005 and about 170,000 people are infected. About 68,000 children have lost both parents to the disease. There is a chronic shortage of drugs to treat HIV/AIDS, he added.

"Water is a luxury rather than a basic necessity," Duracin said, adding that much of the disease in the country is water-borne. Many people leave Haiti because of all

these issues and many of them are forced to return, Duracin said. Many people leave the Haitian countryside and come to the cities for the same reason. They are "people looking for a better life but a better life that never comes," Duracin said.

Still Haiti has "great potential," Duracin told the council. "Haiti remains a country full of hope because it has eight million able bodies willing to work, eight million consumers -- the largest consumer market in the Caribbean, a vibrant youth population, a hospitable location, some beautiful beaches, a rich history and culture, a warm climate," he said. It needs political stability, forgiveness of its external debt and massive investment in its infrastructure and in job creation. It also needs a "massive redistribution of wealth and services," Duracin said. One percent of the population controls half of the nation's wealth. Haiti's often-delayed elections are crucial to the country's future, he said. Haiti's United States-backed interim government recently announced a fourth delay in elections scheduled for November 2005 and the United Nations urged the government to begin the first round of the elections by February 7. Much of the current violence can be traced to the coup in 2004 that forced the country's twice democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, from office. "Peace and stability depend on the outcome of those elections," Duracin said. If the elections are seen as fair and democratic there will be a greater chance for that peace and stability, "otherwise it will be confusion," he said. "Since 2004, our church has been victimized," Duracin told the council. He reported that priests had been shot, had their vehicles stolen and were the victims of other crimes. One priest's life was spared only because his assailant ran out of bullets. Edward Emmanuel Corneille, director of the Bishop Tharp Institute of Business and Technology in Les Cayes, Haiti, was shot and killed in Pétion-Ville, just outside of Port-au-Prince, on January 5. Episcopal Relief and Development (ERD) worked in partnership with the Diocese of Haiti to build the institute, which opened in October 2005. Despite the violence, "the church works," Duracin said, but it has many challenges, including a lack of clergy and a need for better management practices so as to be better stewards. The Episcopal Church of Haiti is the largest diocese of the Episcopal Church. It has more than 100,000 baptized members in 109 congregations. The diocese was founded in 1861 when the Rev. James Theodore Holly, one of the Episcopal Church's first African-American priests -- ordained in 1856 at age 27 -- left New Haven, Connecticut, for Haiti with 100 emigrants. The Haitian church runs 100 primary schools, 15 secondary schools and a school for handicapped students, as well as vocational and agricultural training efforts, a university and a seminary. It also has a very supportive lay ministry, which needs more training, Duracin said. "The church of Haiti has a strong ministry spiritually and socially," he said. "The church in Haiti is very respected." The Haitian diocese has many partnerships with Episcopal Church-related organizations, including ERD; the Diocese of Maine, which is helping Haiti solve some of its communications problems; and the United Thank Offering, which has funded three new schools, according to Duracin. The diocese is also working ecumenically. The new Desmond Tutu Center for Reconciliation and Peace, due to open February 12, will be a place where various denominations can gather "to see if the churches together can do something to make peace among the populations of Haiti," he said.