News



A protester holds up a sign that reads in French, "Security is a right, Haiti deserves it" during a protest against insecurity April 2 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Two women religious, Sr. Evanette Onesaire and Sr. Jeanne Siliane Voltaire, were killed March 31. (AP photo/Odelyn Joseph)



by Chris Herlinger

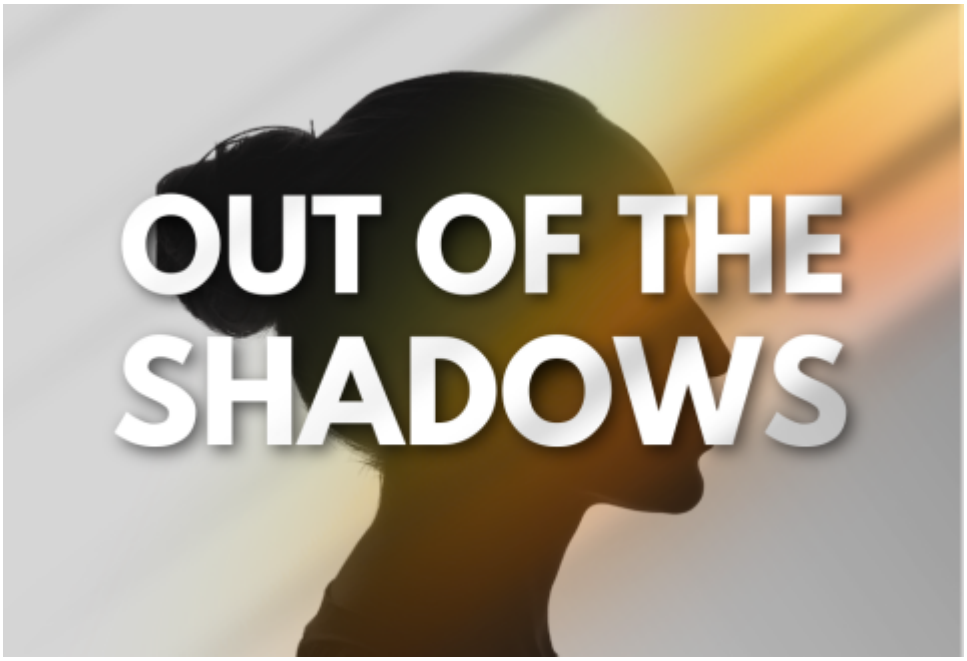
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Editor's note: *This story is part of Global Sisters Report's yearlong series, "Out of the Shadows: Confronting Violence Against Women," which will focus on the ways Catholic sisters are responding to — or are affected by — this global phenomenon.*



(GSR logo/Olivia Bardo)

Two members of the Little Sisters of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, a Haitian religious congregation, were among those killed earlier this week by armed gang members in the central Haiti city of Mirebalais.

Srs. Evanette Onesaire, 74, and Jeanne Siliane Voltaire, 71, both teachers who worked at a state-run school, had taken shelter at their residence near the school after gang members attacked stores and police stations in Mirebalais March 31, according to an April 3 report by Agenzia Fides, the information service of the Pontifical Mission Societies.

Mirebalais, with a population of about 2,000, is about 30 miles northeast of the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince.



Members of the congregation of the Little Sisters of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus are pictured during a 2021 Mass in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Two of the congregation's members, Sr. Evanette Onesaire and Sr. Jeanne Siliane Voltaire, were killed March 31. (OSV News/Courtesy Aid to the Church in Need)

Citing local media reports, the agency said armed gang members entered the home, opened fire and killed the two sisters, as well as the others in the building. The reports did not say the total number of those killed.

However, Sr. Denise Desil, the mother general of the congregation, said three others — including a cook and a laundress — died in addition to the sisters.

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"It's a big loss for us," Desil told Global Sisters Report April 3. "A big, big loss for us."

"They were very good people," Desil said — dedicated teachers who were committed to their students. She said last year Onesaire celebrated her jubilee (50th

anniversary) of entering religious life, while Voltaire had completed her silver 25th anniversary.



Sr. Jeanne Siliane Voltaire (Courtesy of Sr. Denise Desil)

As of April 3, Desil said that given the still-chaotic situation in Mirebalais, the sisters' bodies remained in the home but that the congregation and others were working with authorities to try to return the bodies to the congregation for burial.

Desil said that she does not know if the gangs targeted the sisters, but said it was likely that the deaths happened in the midst of the chaotic situation that overtook Mirebalais.

She said while the deaths were shocking, the violence now spreading to other parts of Haiti is not surprising as the gangs have vowed to control all of Haiti.

The Confederation of Latin American Religious released a statement in sorrow and solidarity with those in Haiti: "As members of religious life in the continent, we reject these actions and accompany the pain of the Haitian people and of the congregations affected."

Earlier in the week, Archbishop Max Leroy Mésidor of Port-au-Prince confirmed the deaths of the sisters to local media, saying that "this is a huge loss for the community." The Vatican was notified of the killings.



Sr. Evanette Onesaire (Courtesy of Sr. Denise Desil)

Agenzia Fides reported that the situation in Mirebalais remained chaotic, with a government official saying the city streets are littered with corpses, and that a hospital run by Mirebalais University Hospital was attacked April 3, according to Haitian media.

Compounding the chaos was that the gangs targeted a prison in Mirebalais on March 31, resulting in the escape of more than 500 inmates. That day, the BBC reported

that some inmates were wandering the streets, according to local reports.

The incident in Mirebalais was the latest tragedy in a deteriorating security situation for the Caribbean nation, in which as many as 12,000 heavily armed gang members have taken de facto control of many cities, including the capital of Port-au-Prince.

In its report on Mirebalais, the BBC noted March 31 that the "attack seems to suggest that [the gangs] are increasingly targeting towns in other areas of the country."

The BBC reported that the attackers in Mirebalais belonged to two gangs — one called the 400 Mawozo and another group calling itself "Taliban." Both form part of a gang coalition called Viv Ansam, the BBC said, which controls northern parts of Port-au-Prince.

The violence in Mirebalais came during a week in which the leader of Haiti's transitional presidential council said it would take further measures to crack down on the unprecedented level of gang violence in the country, the Associated Press reported.

Fritz Alphonse Jean made the declaration April 3, according to AP, a day after thousands of angry and frustrated Port-au-Prince residents took to the streets demonstrating against gang violence. Gunshots erupted during the protests, which were described as the largest demonstrations since the transitional council was established a year ago.

The Miami Herald reported April 2 the demonstrators demanded the resignation of the country's transitional authorities, as well as the head of the Haiti National Police.

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In an interview earlier this year with Global Sisters Report, Desil said sisters at the congregation's motherhouse in Rivière-Froide, a suburb about 30 miles southwest of Port-au-Prince, were now more or less confined due to gang activity.

"We're surrounded by them — these gangs," she said, saying she and others had become like prisoners in their residence.

She added that when sisters did venture out, they had become easy marks for kidnapping and ransom, requiring her and others to don their "civil" wear on the bus to trips to Port-au-Prince.

On April 3, Desil said the situation continues to worsen. "It's really, really bad," she said. "Pray for us."

This story appears in the **Out of the Shadows: Confronting Violence Against Women** feature series. View the full series.