

Haitians return to quake-damaged churches, gangs offer aid

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A man carries chairs for parishioners to celebrate mass in Les Cayes, Haiti, on August 22. (AP Photo/Matias Delacroix)

A Haitian gang leader on August 22 offered a truce to communities shattered by a devastating earthquake—potentially offering a break for a relief effort that has been plagued by hijacked aid trucks and disorder.

The offer came as many Haitians resumed religious services in or outside damaged churches, sometimes for the first time since the magnitude 7.2 quake of August 14. The country's Civil Protection Agency also raised the death toll to 2,207.

It wasn't immediately clear how much impact the truce offer might have. While powerful, Jimmy Chérizier, alias "Barbecue," is far from the only gang leader in Haiti, and widely repeated social media reports of an earlier gang truce failed to prevent attacks on the expanding relief effort.

Gangs have blocked roads, hijacked aid trucks, and stolen supplies, forcing relief workers to transport supplies by helicopter. In places, desperate crowds have scuffled over bags of food.

Chérizier addressed a Facebook video to the hardest-hit parts of Haiti's southwestern peninsula, saying, "We want to tell them that the G9 Revolutionary Forces and allies, all for one and one for all, sympathize with their pain and sorrows."

In the port city of Les Cayes, many attended church to mourn those lost and give thanks for their own survival.

At an evangelical church in the Bergeaud neighborhood, parishioners sang hymns under beams of sunlight streaming through holes in the roof and walls.

Pastor Sevrain Marc Dix Jonas said the service on August 22 was special because his congregation had been unable to meet since the quake.

"Today was a must," Dix Jonas said, standing below a gaping opening high in his church's facade. "To thank God. He protected us. We did not die."

His church was one of the few where congregants could worship inside. At many others, services were held in the street outside collapsed sanctuaries.

Taking that into account, the Roman Catholic church in Les Cayes moved its morning service to 6:30 a.m. to avoid the heat of the day. —Associated Press