

Nearly 200 dead in Haiti massacre as voodoo community reportedly targeted

AFP – Nearly 200 people in Haiti were killed in brutal weekend violence reportedly orchestrated against voodoo practitioners, with the government on Monday condemning a massacre of “unbearable cruelty.”

The killings in the capital Port-au-Prince were overseen by a powerful gang leader convinced that his son’s illness was caused by followers of the religion, according to civil organization the Committee for Peace and Development (CPD).

It was the latest act of extreme violence by powerful gangs that control most of the capital city in the impoverished Caribbean country mired for decades in political instability, natural disasters and other woes.

“He decided to cruelly punish all elderly people and voodoo practitioners who, in his imagination, would be capable of sending a bad spell on his son,” a statement from the Haiti-based group said.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned the “horrific” violence, which his spokesman said left at least 184 people, including 127 elderly men and women, dead.

Calling the bloody episode an “act of barbarity, of unbearable cruelty,” the office of Prime Minister Alix Didier Fils-Aime said “this monstrous crime constitutes a direct attack on humanity.”

Both the CPD and UN said that the killings took place in the capital’s western coastal neighborhood of Cite Soleil.

Reached by telephone by AFP, a resident confirmed the attacks and said that his 76-year-old father was among the victims.

“The bandits set fire to his body. The family cannot even organize a burial for him since we were unable to recover the body,” he told AFP on condition of anonymity so as not to compromise the safety of other relatives.

“I also fear for their lives,” he said. “I will try to get them out.”

– Taken to be ‘executed’ –

“The gang’s soldiers were responsible for identifying victims in their homes to take them to the chief’s stronghold to be executed,” the CPD said.

“Reliable sources within the community report that more than a hundred people were massacred, their bodies mutilated and burned in the street,” it said.

One of the organization’s leaders, Fritznel Pierre, told Radio Magik 9 in an interview that the number of casualties was not exhaustive, as the area was difficult to access.

He reported that henchmen had hunted down old people and voodoo followers living in the Wharf Jeremie section of Cite Soleil between Friday evening and Saturday.

“Motorcycle taxi drivers who tried to flee with targeted people were also executed,” he said.

Voodoo was brought to Haiti by African slaves and is a mainstay of the country’s culture. It was banned during French colonial rule and only recognized as an official religion by the Haitian government in 2003.

While it incorporates elements of other religious beliefs, including Catholicism, voodoo has been historically attacked by other religions.

Haiti has suffered from decades of instability but the situation escalated in February when armed groups launched

coordinated attacks in the capital to overthrow then-prime minister Ariel Henry.

Gangs now control 80 percent of the city. Despite a Kenyan-led police support mission, backed by the United States and UN, violence has continued to soar.

The UN chief called on authorities to conduct a thorough investigation into the weekend massacre and also reiterated calls for more international support to assist Haitian police in their battle against the gangs.

More than 700,000 people are internally displaced in Haiti, half of them children; added to this are 5,000 forced from their homes by the weekend massacre, said the International Organization for Migration.

The latest killings bring the death toll this year in Haiti to around 5,000 people, according to the United Nations.

AFP