



Assassination Attempt on American and Haitian Engineers Working to Solve Haiti's Agricultural and Environmental Problems

JAN 29, CROIX-DES-BOUQUETS, HAITI — Lakay Vèt co-founders Sebastien Benoit, a Port-au-Prince native, and McKinnley Workman, a United States national, arrived at the front gate of the Lakay Vèt headquarters in Croix-des-Bouquets at 1pm EST. Upon arrival, the pair were ambushed by armed bandits from a nearby community who have been terrorizing the company and local farmers for the past week. This gang was sent by organized leaders, fueled by political and monetary motivations, who directed them to specifically kill us and seize the company site.

Benoit and Workman sustained serious cuts, bruises, severe head and limb trauma and even a large human bite wound. After the attack, the pair managed to drive themselves in the heavily damaged truck first to the Croix-des-Bouquets courthouse, then after hours of waiting were able to get back on-site with the police to recover some company assets and ensure the safety of the community. After dark they finally made it to the hospital where their injuries were treated. The following two days were filled with doctors' visits, legal council, and other meetings.

The attack, clearly premeditated as evidenced by the coordination between the attackers and the fact they were concealed and lying in wait, came after Workman and Benoit stepped out of their vehicle to unlock the first of two security gates that protect the facility and farmlands. Those neighbors who came to their aid will not be named for their and their families' safety. The gang is still in control of the company site and property and have begun to burn down portions of the infrastructure.

MCKINNLEY WORKMAN'S RECOUNTING OF THE INCIDENT -- While opening the first gate to the compound, a group of about 20-30 men ran at us from behind bushes and started waving handguns and hurling rocks at us and the company vehicle. Upon seeing the armed bandits approaching, we immediately shouted that we worked for the U.S. Embassy as a defense mechanism. We presume that this act caused the bandits to momentarily reconsider firing the first bullets. Instead of immediately gunning us down, the bandits then quickly approached with large rocks and engaged us in hand-to-hand combat. We only escaped with the help of the farmers and community members who work with the company. The farmers that we work with and who live nearby heard the ruckus and ran out from their homes to help us. The attackers started shouting that Lakay Vèt's vehicle is now theirs and they are in charge of the community.

As we were running back to the truck Sebastien saw a thug coming after my head with a rock and charged at him, knocking the rock from his hand. Sebastien shouted for me to get to the vehicle as they surrounded us. I ran to the truck and backed it up to protect us on one side so Sebastien could



get in, but he was already on the ground with one of the attackers while the others were still hurling rocks at us. I saw Sebastien wrestling with him, and after the attack we found that among his many injuries was a human bite to the stomach.

Another attacker got in close behind Sebastien and struck him in the back of the head with a rock. I saw Sebastien falling to the ground and ran toward him, but he was unconscious and I couldn't wake him up. I was shouting at him, telling him that I need him to get up right now, but got no response. I was kicking my legs at the attackers to keep them away from him as he laid flat on his back with his mouth open and his eyes staring blankly. Later, when I asked if he knew I was yelling at him, he said he had no thought processes: he just felt fear.

While being pelted with rocks, I dragged him toward the car while the local farming community tried to help us get away. I remember they weren't charging the bandits directly, presumably because they didn't want the heat from it later, but rather just stood by us with their hands up saying "No no, Y'ap ale! Y'ap ale" (translation: "No, no, they're leaving! They're leaving!"). One of the bandits managed to tear Sebastien away from me again, dragging him away from the vehicle. I yelled that we are U.S. citizens, then fell onto Sebastien. What I was yelling seemed to make them think twice so naturally I kept shouting, louder and louder, in English and in Haitian Creole, again and again. I grabbed my Taser and shot the cartridge at the guy that was dragging Sebastien away from me. I was scared that they would think it was a gun and use that as an invitation to shoot, but they didn't.

After tasing the attacker he fell on the ground, but I must not have hit him cleanly because he didn't stay down long. He came after us again and I threw the discharged taser at him. As I was dragging Sebastien back to the truck I grabbed my phone and was again shouting that we were U.S. citizens. I yelled the Creole equivalent of "Everyone will know what you've done and will be watching you!".

They saw I had my phone out and one of them tried to take it from me. When he approached, I pulled him in close to me and stuck my thumb deep into his left eye and then kicked him in the stomach as hard as I could. He fell on the ground and I ran back to Sebastien. trying to lift him into the truck as he was slowly regaining consciousness. One of the locals from the farming community, (I have no idea who he was but I wish I knew because he helped me save Sebastien's life) helped me lift Sebastien toward the seat of the truck. Sebastien was starting to be able to move, and with my help climbed into the truck, insisted on driving, and told me to call his dad. We sped away, sitting on glass shards from the broken windows.

The farmers that helped us during the attack ran away and went into hiding. Ultimately, the bandits stole my glasses, camera, some shovels we had in the truck, and of course the Taser I threw at them. One also tried to jump in the truck as we were speeding away. Sebastien's dad met us on the road in what seemed like minutes and escorted us. Later in the day we could see that the bandits were still on-site and had begun burning down company infrastructure.

AFTERMATH -- The company and the property is still being held and controlled by the gang. We can still see the smoke from our burning infrastructure walls. It's been a week since the bandits started spewing threats, and still the community is terrified. They're afraid that their beautiful farming community and all of the opportunity that Lakay Vèt brought to it will become just another territory for bandits. Terrified for their safety and that of their families, the farmers are afraid to return to the farmland or to Lakay Vèt. Some of them won't even go back to their own homes for fear of being shot. Our allies in the community took a big risk in helping us. They know the realities of Haiti. They know



that we are their best chance and if they do nothing, they will lose everything they have worked for, and be forced to adapt to a very different life. People who were getting an education, building a life, and learning about sustainability and agriculture are scared that the police are not going to be able to keep the bandits under control. The land they farm is their livelihood. They've already had to sell many of their animals so they can buy food for their families - their animals are analogous to our savings accounts, and that is what they are living on now. But what happens when that runs out? They won't have many choices.

WHAT NOW? — Be clear with us, Haiti. What do you really want?

The president of Haiti, Jovenel Moïse, has been working to encourage foreign and local investment in agriculture and sustainable development. Lakay Vèt represents those efforts, from top to bottom.

Contrary to the president's direction, the bandits who attacked us have been telling the community that Haiti isn't a place for "Blan" (translation: "foreigners") and that they decide who comes and leaves. But the reality is that the farmers we work with are seeing a difference in their homes, their community, and are building better lives for themselves through sustainable agriculture and hard work - work they take pride in. The bandits, however, aren't getting a piece of the action and want Lakay Vèt as well as the community to pay them because they believe it's their turf. For the past week and still today, a farmland that is usually full of activity, farmers, their livestock and crops, and is a valuable resource and source of income for many, is deserted.

Lakay Vèt was changing people's lives, empowering them with the tools and resources to escape poverty, educate themselves, and start to understand sustainable development in their daily lives. One of the men that works with us is studying information technology. Another wants to be a doctor, and yet another is learning about agriculture so he can become an agronomist. With Lakay Vèt, the farmers and their families have opportunity, and therein lies a problem for our attackers: if people aren't struggling, aren't suffering, if people can help themselves, it threatens our attackers' control over the area.

One of the young guys that works with us and wants to become an engineer told us one day while sitting under our mango trees something that will stick in our heads forever: he said, "Avan Lakay Vèt, nou te egziste, kounya nou gen chans pou viv." Basically, that means that when you are that poor, you survive, you exist. But you don't have the opportunity to live. You don't have the opportunity to feel alive. Lakay Vèt gives him hope.

CONCLUSION -- Many of Lakay Vèt's assets have been stolen, much of the facility and its assets - including a company vehicle - have been destroyed, and Sebastien and McKinnley, despite injury, desire to get back to work. But they still can't return. The company and property are still being held hostage and we continue to see our on-site infrastructure burning a distance.

Lakay Vèt's model works, the impact is direct and real, but we can't do it alone. We need support from the Haitian government to protect businesses that are working every day for the sustainable development of the country and enrichment of its people.

Lakay Vèt will not pay any of the bribes the attackers demand; Lakay Vèt will not turn its back on the community it works with; Lakay Vèt will not incite violence.

The time for action is now.



COMPANY PROFILE — [Lakay Vèt](#) (lak-eye veht) is a business with headquarters in Croix-des-Bouquets (part of the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area) that works with farmers to teach sustainable agriculture and produce biofertilizer from waste. It is the result of Haitian and American engineers putting their skills together to solve Haiti's agriculture and environmental problems. With significant foreign investment, Lakay Vèt has been working in Croix-des-Bouquets for over a year with local farming communities to create opportunity from waste resources and combat desertification with sustainable agriculture.