

GANG VIOLENCE AND THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN HAITI

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The history of Haiti reflects a journey filled with various challenges from the colonial period to the present day. The process that began with Christopher Columbus's arrival in 1492 continued under Spanish colonialism. Subsequently, in the early 17th century, the French settled on the island, seizing the western half of Hispaniola in 1697. The slave trade became the main factor shaping the island's economy, and Haiti became one of France's most important colonies. However, following slave uprisings and the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), which led to Haiti's declaration of independence in 1804, a historical turning point occurred. This revolution was significant both as the successful uprising by the world's first black slaves to abolish slavery and as an inspiration for independence struggles in Latin America. However, post-independence Haiti faced a series of problems such as internal turmoil, external interventions, and political instability. This historical background provides a fundamental basis for understanding Haiti's current political, economic, and social dynamics.

Haiti has long struggled with poverty, external interventions, coups, and economic issues. Additionally, it grapples with significant natural disasters such as the 2010 earthquake, environmental problems, and poor social services and infrastructure. There are numerous obstacles to the country's development and progress. Since the beginning of 2021, a new battleground has emerged: Gang Violence. In 2021, then-President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated by foreign mercenaries alleged to be Colombian. Following this pivotal moment, armed gang attacks and violent incidents have rapidly increased nationwide. Additionally, Ariel Henry is not actually an elected leader. He was selected as the next President of Haiti by Moïse just two days before Moïse's assassination in 2021. Henry's swearing in as Prime Minister with the support of the international community has influenced the controversial process in the country and exacerbated the situation. Rising prices, inflation, and crumbling infrastructure in Haiti have posed significant obstacles to Henry's consolidation of authority.

Analysis of data from the United Nations on March 14, 2024, reveals that more civilians were killed in Haiti in the first four months of 2023 than in Ukraine (World Food Program USA, 2024). The most significant consequences of this conflict have been devastating hunger and displacement. Gang violence continues to escalate in 2024; particularly, the prison raid in March has escalated political instability and violence to a new level. It is observed that civilians are being killed, displaced, subjected to hunger, and exposed to violence on a daily basis nationwide. The international community's response, which goes beyond condemnation, is noteworthy.

Haiti has been a country in chaos for years, and the situation has worsened with the 2021 presidential assassination. Especially, the Port-au-Prince Prison raid in February 2024, while Prime Minister Henry was out of the country, is crucial in understanding the level of violence and the power of gangs in the country. Escaped prisoners and armed gangs roam the city, killing civilians. This analysis seeks to answer two important questions: What is happening in Haiti? What is the reason behind the recent surge in violence in Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere?

The Visible Face of Violence in Haiti: Gangs

It is estimated that there are approximately 200 gangs in Haiti, with 23 of these gangs operating in the capital region of Port-au-Prince. Additionally, according to UN data, about 80% of the country's capital is controlled by gangs (CBS News, 2024). Through arms trafficking and extortion, gangs have further strengthened their power due to the weakening of the state and the inability of the insufficient police force to control them. With high-level military weapons, gangs have significantly influenced the violence ecosystem in the country.

Gangs have managed to accumulate large sums of money independently of politicians and businessmen. By engaging in activities such as robbery, kidnapping for ransom, drug trafficking, and arms smuggling, gangs have declared financial independence while also attracting attention with their political dimension. They use the income and weapons obtained from illegal activities for political purposes. In fact, it can be said that the most important way for gangs to maintain their existence is to be able to manage political power.

When examining gangs in Haiti, the first notable gang is the G9 Family and Allies Alliance, known as G9, led by Jimmy Chérizier. The second significant gang is the GPep gang led by Gabriel Jean-Pierre. These two prominent gangs have been competing for control of Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, for years. However, towards the end of 2023, with the slogan "living together," the two gangs joined forces with the aim of overthrowing Prime Minister Henry. Another goal of the collaboration is seen as preventing the

deployment of a multinational security mission to Haiti. However, it is unknown how long this collaboration will continue; alliances are constantly changing.

Peak in Gang Violence: Port-au-Prince Prison Raid

The long-standing gang violence in Haiti reached a higher level, especially in February 2024. One of the most significant factors contributing to this was seen as Prime Minister Henry's decision to postpone the planned elections in February. The outbreak of mass protests and Henry's departure from Haiti to Guyana and Kenya to ensure the deployment of a UN-backed multinational police mission to stabilize the country further accelerated events. Talks in Guyana resulted in the postponement of elections and their rescheduling for 2025. Subsequently, criminal gangs coordinated attacks on Port-au-Prince.

One of the latest and most significant conflicts occurred after Prime Minister Ariel Henry's visit to Kenya on February 29. Haiti does not have a standing army and therefore lacks the necessary equipment to stop the ongoing chaos in the country. Essentially, Henry's visit to Kenya was known to bring foreign armed forces to help combat gangs in the country. After Prime Minister Henry left the country, armed groups attacked key locations such as international airports and prisons. These gangs burned down police stations, closed the country's airports, attacked the two largest prisons in the country, and released prisoners. Consequently, on March 3, Haitian authorities declared a state of emergency, which is still ongoing as of March 28. The responsibility for the attacks was claimed by Jimmy Chérizier, the gang leader known as Barbekü. Additionally,

Chérizier warned that if Henry did not resign and the international community supported him, an internal conflict leading to genocide would occur. The main reason for the demand for Henry's resignation is seen as his status as an appointed leader rather than an elected one and his failure to hold the elections expected in 2022. Henry's request for an international security force in 2022 to solve this problem illustrates the reaction of gangs against Henry. Henry, who was stranded in Puerto Rico and unable to return to Haiti, announced his resignation in a video shared on March 12.

Jimmy Chérizier, the gang leader known as "Barbeque" and a former police officer, made statements after the attacks, saying, "We will liberate the country with our weapons and the Haitian people." Chérizier is not just a simple gang leader; he is a gang leader who receives support from other major gangs estimated to control 80% of Port-au-Prince, including the group known as the G9 Family and Allies. Chérizier's aim is seen as neutralizing government ministers and the police and preventing Henry from returning to the country. Gangs that displaced thousands of Haitians besieged fuel points, clashed with rival gangs, and inflicted violence on civilians in various ways.

The Situation of Civilians: Hunger and Displacement

In addition to the longstanding political and economic problems in Haiti, the lack of elections since 2016, the assassination of Moïse in 2021, and the subsequent significant increase in gang power have pushed the country to the brink. According to UN data, 362,000 people have been displaced due to gang violence (World Food Program USA, 2024). Just since the

beginning of 2024, 35,000 people have fled their homes in hope of escaping the crisis. The main reason for this is seen as the food crisis and the lack of access to medical services caused by the conflicts. According to UN data, nearly 5,000 people were killed in 2023. Additionally, after the attacks on February 29, 15,000 people were displaced within just one week. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported that between March 9, 2024, and March 15, 2024, 86,040 people were displaced (Center for Disaster Philanthropy, 2024).

Haiti has a population of approximately 11 million, and 5 million Haitians are struggling with famine (Center for Disaster Philanthropy, 2024). Due to material shortages and access difficulties, most hospitals in the country have closed down, and those that remain open have reduced their capacity. As a result of the increase in violence in 2024, hospitals, already in short supply, have been looted, and there are major disruptions in the health system. While food was already a priority need, water and health have also been added to the list of urgent needs.

Increased insecurity has also affected the humanitarian aid sector. Gangs controlling transportation routes such as ports and international airports have hindered the delivery of humanitarian aid to the vulnerable population.

The negative impact of gang violence on the Haitian people is evident. The Haitian population is facing many challenges such as hunger, lack of health services, displacement, and the recruitment of children by gangs. However, when examining the situation in Haiti, it is observed that the population is intertwined with gangs. Young men are

joining gangs due to the influence of economic and social problems.

Aftermath of The Port-au-Prince Prison Raid, Voices From Latin America

Following the Port-au-Prince prison raid, regional leaders of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM), of which Haiti is also a part, convened an emergency summit to discuss a framework for political transition, which the United States has also urged to expedite. CARICOM has attempted to encourage political groups in Haiti to form an interim unity government but has not succeeded. Gang leader Jimmy Chérizier, in response to negotiations with CARICOM, stated, “They went abroad with their families, and as those who stayed in Haiti, we need to make the decisions.” This statement clearly indicates his stance against any proposed solution from outside.

More than two weeks have passed since the violence in the capital, Port-au-Prince, and the resignation of the country’s Prime Minister. There is still no clear information on how the interim presidential council will be formed. According to CARICOM’s announcement, the transitional council will consist of seven members elected from all over Haiti, including the private sector and various political groups, with voting rights. In addition, two members without voting rights will be selected from civil society and religious groups. However, even after the establishment of the interim presidential council, it does not seem likely that gangs will disarm.

Haiti’s neighbors have also responded to the recent events by strengthening their defenses and recalling embassy personnel. The Dominican Republic, which shares the

island of Hispaniola with Haiti and deported tens of thousands of Haitians last year, sent its Defense Minister to inspect the border, observe progress on the border, and assess military capacity. The Dominican Republic, known for its harsh treatment of Haitian migrants in recent years, has stated that it will not join any international force to be established. Additionally, it emphasized that it will not allow Haitian refugee camps on its territory. It is also known that President Luis Abinader did not allow Ariel Henry to enter the country. The Bahamas has also recalled some embassy personnel. Mexico has advised its citizens to limit themselves to essential travel and stock up on food, water, and fuel.

Latin American leaders generally make remarkable statements and reactions about regional solidarity. However, for a country like Haiti, where 80% of the capital is controlled by gangs, there are no offers of assistance from other countries in the region. The number of Latin American presidents speaking out about gangs that terrorize the population and kill thousands is very low. Therefore, it is observed that Ariel Henry is knocking on the doors of African countries for a solution to this issue. Henry has requested the deployment of a police force to Haiti under a security plan coordinated by the United Nations. At the time of the gang crisis, Henry was in Kenya to expedite the establishment of the UN Multinational Security Support Mission.

Brazil, which could be seen as a leader in the region, led a multinational protection force known as the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) in Haiti for several years until 2017. However, in the events of 2024, neither Brazil nor any other major Latin American country seems willing to take on this role.

Questions about Henry's legitimacy are also seen as a factor in the lack of more regional assistance to Haiti. Latin American countries want the internal crisis in Haiti to be resolved before providing assistance to the controversial Haitian government.

In fact, the worst thing Latin American countries can do, which is what they are doing now, is 'nothing.'

International Community's Response to The Crisis

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has expressed concern about the "rapidly deteriorating security situation" and emphasized the need for more funding to establish an international police mission. When examining the UN's first significant contacts with Haiti, it is evident that the peacekeeping force known as MINUSTAH (Mission des Unies pour la stabilisation en Haiti) was established by the United Nations Security Council after the coup in Haiti in 2004. However, the UN-supported intervention that began in 2004 failed to bring stability and was overshadowed by the abuse of peacekeepers. The UN mission has previously been implicated in horrific allegations of sexual abuse and a cholera outbreak originating from a UN camp that led to the deaths of approximately 10,000 people. For these reasons, it is believed that a new mission under UN leadership would provoke a reaction in Haiti. In other words, one of the significant debates that arise is the potential external intervention that could help suppress violence. Considering the past failures of the United Nations and the United States, the criticism and silence of many Haitians do not come as a surprise.

The events at the Port-au-Prince Penitentiary are not the first instances of

gang violence in Haiti. It is known that in the summer of 2022, large parts of the capital, Port-au-Prince, were seized by gangs. In 2023, the UN Security Council authorized an international security mission to suppress violence. It is observed that the US and the UN have reiterated calls for international intervention in Haiti to break the power of gangs that create a violent environment and cripple the economy. The most effective option for reducing violence, improving the humanitarian perspective, and creating a peaceful environment is seen as sending a mission force by the UN Security Council. However, only Jamaica has expressed willingness to send troops to Haiti.

The complex and long-standing problems in Haiti highlight the necessity of international intervention. However, especially in light of the experience of MINUSTAH, the possible risks and effects of a new UN mission should be considered. Particularly, the negative consequences of previous missions such as sexual abuse and cholera outbreaks increase concerns that future intervention could lead to distrust and backlash in the local community. Additionally, the willingness of only Jamaica to send troops underscores the need for more discussion and cooperation on how the international community approaches the situation in Haiti. Perhaps addressing Haiti's problems not only through military intervention but also through a long-term and comprehensive approach to development and political reform would be more appropriate.

In 2023, the UN outlined a framework for an international force it would finance and facilitate in Haiti but not lead. Instead of leading, it was planned to send 1000 police officers from participating countries such as Kenya, Benin, Bangladesh, Chad, and

Barbados. However, after Henry's resignation, the timing of the mission changed, and it was stated that the mission would be paused until a transitional council was established. The failure to reach a conclusion in prolonged discussions, the inability to rectify the violent environment, and, more importantly, the increase in violent incidents in 2024 question the effectiveness of the UN.

Jean-Martin Bauer, the President of the World Food Program in Haiti, has stated in his recent remarks that the increasing levels of hunger have further escalated the security crisis in the country, calling for urgent action.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in his statements on March 15th, hinted at the formation of a transitional council for Haiti. It is also noted that the Biden administration welcomed Henry's resignation. However, it is known that the US supported Henry in stabilizing the country before, which has led to criticisms of the US by Haitians. Additionally, the US has supported a UN-led operation for peacebuilding in Haiti. Canadian UN Ambassador Bob Rae has stated that the best way to eliminate gangs controlling Haiti is through military intervention. Moreover, it has been stated by the White House spokesperson Jean-Pierre that the Biden administration has pledged an additional \$58 million in humanitarian aid to Haiti. However, it is noteworthy that in discussions held in 2023, the US and Canada did not want to take the lead in any international intervention. The US has pledged \$200 million and Canada \$59 million in donations to the international force in Haiti.

White House spokesperson John Kirby has expressed great concern over recent

violent incidents and has called on citizens to return as soon as possible. Additionally, the US Embassy has stated that it will provide limited services, while Canada has announced the temporary closure of its Embassy. Delegates from various parts of the world convened in Jamaica on March 11, 2024, to discuss how to respond to the crisis in Haiti.

It is known that in 2023, thousands of Haitians attempted to reach the US in hopes of asylum but were turned away at the US border due to US policies. Additionally, Robert Muggah, a partner at the Igarape Institute, an independent think tank focusing on democracy, public, climate, and digital security, claims that weapons and ammunition smuggled into Haiti come from the US. Despite no weapons being produced in Haiti, a UN report released in January clearly shows that all kinds of weapons, from 9mm pistols to AK47 assault rifles, sniper rifles, and machine guns, were sent to Port-au-Prince. It is widely known that these weapons play a significant role in strengthening gangs. While it is a known fact that weapons in Haiti come from the US, it raises questions about the sincerity of US peacebuilding efforts.

The complexity of the situation in Haiti and the increasing incidents of violence require urgent action from the international community. However, given the challenges and consequences of previous UN missions, serious consideration must be given to how a new international intervention will be managed and effective. Especially factors such as leadership issues and establishing local credibility, as demonstrated by past experiences, should not be overlooked. In addition to the security crisis in Haiti, increasing hunger and economic difficulties require the

integration of urgent humanitarian aid and long-term development efforts. The focus of the US and other international actors should not only be on military intervention but also on addressing the basic needs of Haiti. However, the fact that weapons supplied to Haiti come from the US indicates the need for the international community to adopt a consistent approach and exert more effort to stop arms smuggling.

Conclusion

Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, has long been struggling with leaders associated with corruption, as well as the turmoil created by failed state institutions and armed gangs. Perhaps one of the most important questions that can be asked is, “How can Haiti break the cycle of violence and instability?” With armed gangs controlling 80% of the capital, Port-au-Prince, preventing Prime Minister Ariel Henry from returning to the country and forcing him to resign has left Haiti facing a major and violent uprising.

Chérizier, who compares himself to important figures like Nelson Mandela and Fidel Castro, sees himself as a revolutionary and even claims he will redistribute wealth. However, it is evident that the ongoing conflicts in the capital of Haiti inflict the most harm on the poor people living in slums. Approximately 350,000 Haitians have been forced to leave their homes and are condemned to live in camps under very dire conditions. Chérizier, who claims he will help the “very poor” people, is actually causing the greatest harm to them.

According to recent data, food insecurity in Haiti appears to be at the level of “emergency,” one level below “famine.” In other words, the Haitian people are

struggling with record levels of hunger. Approximately 5 million of Haiti’s 11.5 million population are facing the threat of famine.

One of the most prominent gang leaders in Haiti, Jimmy Chérizier, stated that “Those who harm the country are not only armed people, but also politicians,” rejecting foreign powers’ attempts to create a roadmap for Haiti. As mentioned earlier, efforts by organizations such as CARICOM have been insufficient.

The crisis in Haiti is the result of years of political instability, extreme poverty, natural disasters, weak state institutions, and the absence of the international community. These factors have empowered gangs while leaving the Haitian population vulnerable to violence. External interventions and military solutions have failed to understand the root causes of the crisis and resolve it, paving the way for human rights abuses.

After the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in 2021, Haiti has plunged into a serious humanitarian, political, and security crisis. It has been observed that criminal gangs, which control a significant part of the country after the assassination and have access to main infrastructure such as ports and airports, have strengthened. More than 3,600 inmates were released in the attack on the Port-au-Prince Penitentiary in early March, sparking a wave of terror in various parts of the country and leading to the resignation of Prime Minister Ariel Henry. The recent escalation of violence has reached alarming levels, with reports of dozens of deaths, abductions, sexual violence against women, and thousands of people forcibly displaced since the beginning of 2024.

So what will the future hold for Haiti after these events? Is there a way to achieve lasting stability? How can Haiti combat gang violence? There are no clear answers to these questions, but given Haiti's overall political and economic situation, it is unlikely that problems will be resolved in the near future. Haiti is the poorest country in Latin America and one of the most unequal countries in terms of wealth distribution. Given the lack of opportunities, hunger, high unemployment rates, and lack of education, it is not difficult to understand why many young and hopeless men join gangs. What is happening in Haiti is a reflection of social and economic problems.

One of the most important things to be done to restore order is to end the dominance of gangs. Another is to hold elections, which have not been held since 2016. However, both of these solutions are currently seen as distant possibilities.

The deployment of an international military force in Haiti also seems logical. However, the presence of an international force in the country can trigger violence. Before any military intervention, efforts should be made in collaboration with civil society groups in the region, which could lead to more positive outcomes for Haiti. Considering Haiti's history of failed external interventions, it is evident how difficult the situation is once again.

Ariel Henry came to power with the support of foreign powers, primarily the US; it is not very meaningful to think that an agreement acceptable to these foreign powers will bring peace to Haiti. Calls for "democracy" from the US and the UN, among others, do not seem valid because the chance for the people to participate in

governance with their elected officials has already been blocked by the US and other foreign powers, and Henry, an unelected Prime Minister, has taken office. Any solution proposed thereafter should ultimately rely on the Haitian people themselves.

It is clear that Haiti faces deep and complex problems that need to be addressed. The erosion of public trust by leaders associated with corruption, the violence created by failed state institutions and armed gangs, has deepened the country's instability. In this context, serious and comprehensive steps must be taken to stop gang violence and restore state authority.

First and foremost, fair and transparent elections must be held to strengthen Haiti's democratic institutions and protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of the people. However, it is important to ensure a secure environment for these elections to take place. In this regard, it is important for the international community to provide support for the election process and take necessary measures to ensure election security.

Furthermore, comprehensive security reform and programs aimed at reintegrating gang members into society should be developed to reduce the influence of armed gangs. However, for these programs to be successful, active participation and support from the local community are essential. Urgent measures should be taken to address the nutrition and food security crisis and meet the basic needs of the people. In this context, international aid organizations and other stakeholders should provide support for emergency assistance and long-term development projects to ensure food security in Haiti.

Finally, a long-term plan should be developed for Haiti's future, and cooperation with the international community should be sought to implement this plan. However, for this plan to be successful, it must be based on the needs and demands of the Haitian people themselves. In addition to external interventions, empowering and encouraging the participation of the local community is essential for Haiti's development and stability.

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