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Haiti: The Crisis No One Wants to Own and the Future of Latin America



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Photo: Haitian Foreign Minister Jean Victor Geneus addresses the United Nations Security Council meeting on the question concerning Haiti in New York on October 17, 2022. Source: Rick Bajornas / U.N.

The discussion of sending a new international security force to Haiti illustrates that the international community can no longer ignore the downward spiral of political and economic dysfunctionality, corruption, violence, and criminality in the country. The ongoing Haitian humanitarian situation illustrates the disastrous endpoints toward which these reinforcing dynamics are pushing many countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, the region to which the U.S. is most connected by bonds of geography, commerce, and family.

How Haiti Got to This Point

scholars to explain the deep and enduring nature of its current dysfunction. Yet, at the same time, its modern political trajectory was certainly shaped by the authoritarianism and human rights abuses during the regimes of “Papa Doc” and “Baby Doc” Duvalier (1957-1986), as well as by the inherited weakness of democratic institutions and immaturity of democratic culture and actors that colored political interactions during the Aristide and Preval presidencies, ending in the country’s 2004 democratic breakdown and United Nations intervention.

The expanded flow of foreign aid into Haiti during the years of United Nations presence channeled through Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that provided such aid into key references, arguably created a culture of dependency. That dependency culture only deepened during the period of U.N. oversight and security force presence that began in 2004, and with the disastrous 2010 earthquake, which killed an estimated 222,000 people.

The earthquake and subsequent natural disasters—including hurricanes Matthew (2016) and Laura (2020), and the 2021 back-to-back earthquake and tropical storm Grace—highlighted the fragility of Haiti’s infrastructure, producing far more fatalities and damage than similar disasters would have, further complicated the country’s desperate conditions. Among other manifestations of this vulnerability, the cholera outbreak that followed the 2010 earthquake which spread rapidly through the population—ultimately killing over 9,000 people—thanks in part to Haiti’s inadequate and damaged

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sanitary infrastructure. The COVID-19 pandemic, coming on the heels of such recurrent disasters, only compounded Haiti's malaise and desperation.

During the period under U.N. oversight, the situation of public corruption and criminality has arguably deteriorated, leading those Haitians who did not migrate into a culture of "enclaves" enabled by private infrastructure and security to compensate for their inadequate public counterparts. Public corruption during this period spiraled out of control, including the diversion of a large part of USD \$2 billion in "Petrocaribe" aid provided under non-transparent conditions by the Venezuelan government.

The courtship of local youth gangs by politicians through patronage relationships, also seen in other Caribbean and Central American governments, grew particularly out of hand during this period. Former President Jovenel Moise, whose companies were implicated in corruption scandals, was reported to have a role in the promotion of gangs to support his political ends. The powerful "G9 and family" gang, for example, reportedly supported and benefited from Moise's PHTK party. Its principal rival, G-PEP, was reportedly linked to the rival Lavalas political movement (today the "Struggling People's Organization"). With political patronage of ever more powerful gangs, as the authority of the government over Haitian national territory eroded, by the time of Moise's July 2021 assassination, the gangs had become more powerful than the corrupt and poorly funded and equipped national police.

The COVID-19 pandemic arguably contributed to the power of the gangs as well, allowing them to increase their role as a source of social control, including directly or indirectly controlling who received aid flowing into the country from international relief organizations.

During this time, democracy, which was never solidly founded within Haitian

contributed to this problem by giving the president insufficient powers to govern vis-à-vis the legislature if it wished to obstruct the president. Nonetheless, Haiti's recent political history has been characterized by the continuing inability to produce clear, democratically-elected leaders. The extended political crisis began with [the resignation of President Michael Martelly](#), leading to an interim government and two chaotic election cycles, culminating in the delayed [election of Jovenel Moise](#), with that delay becoming the basis of a constitutional dispute over the end of his term. When Haiti subsequently failed to elect a new Congress once its term expired, Moise went on to rule without a legislature. After [his term expired in February 2021](#), Moise continued to rule, according to some. Moise's assassination produced a [succession struggle](#), ultimately [filled by acting-President Ariel Henry](#), who has also continued to rule without democratic elections.

The deteriorating situation during the Moise presidency was not helped by the United Nations' decision to reduce its security presence in the country. Faced with the politically unacceptable reality of a permanent peacekeeping force, in 2016, the United Nations declared the [U.N. Stabilization Force in Haiti](#) (MINUSTAH, as per its acronym in French), had completed its mission and [downsized the force](#) in 2017, which had provided a semblance of security in the country since 2004, replacing it with the more limited [U.N. Justice Support in Haiti](#) (MINUJUSTH, as per its acronym in French). In 2019, as conditions further deteriorated, it withdrew MINUJUSTH, replacing it with the token [U.N. Integrated Office in Haiti](#) (BINUH, as per its acronym in French).

The Current Crisis of Gang Violence

Under Ariel Henry—and with the contributing hardship of the grave interaction between poverty and desperation—dysfunctional governance and criminality has spiraled even more out of control. By the end of 2021, [almost 100 gangs](#) were operating in Haiti. Of these, two powerful gang coalitions are

Cherizier (alias “Barbecue”) was a former Haitian national police officer; and second, G-PEP, led by Ti Gabriel includes Haiti’s largest single gang, 400 Mawozoo.

From April 24 to May 5, 2022, the two rival groupings engaged in a major series of battles across the greater Port-au-Prince area. In June 2022, the “5 seconds” gang took over and forcibly occupied Haiti’s Supreme Court for a week, robbing everything from judicial documents to office furniture. It was the fifth time this year the Supreme Court had been broken into. In July 2022, Haitian customs intercepted a shipping container filled with 120,000 rounds of ammunition, reflecting the gangs’ acute need for ammunition to sustain their fighting.

Across the country, the gangs principally lived off theft and extortion, but as these opportunities dried up and the groups became more powerful, gangs turned increasingly to kidnapping, including doctors and relief workers, forcing the NGOs who were trying to help to limit their presence as well. In October 2021, Haiti’s largest gang, 400 Mawozo (affiliated with G-PEP), abducted 16 U.S. missionaries.

Although the Haitian National police subsequently targeted the group and impaired its role in the national kidnapping epidemic, the kidnappings continued. In the first three months of 2022, 225 persons were kidnapped, a 58 percent increase over the previous year. By the summer of 2022, the gangs were abducting U.N. personnel.

Haitian gangs have also increased their use of extortion, robbery, and routes they control to secure revenue and pressure the government and aid organizations into concessions. The G9 coalition, for example, has periodically restricted access along the key road from the Varreux petroleum terminal to the capital, Port-au-Prince, including in November 2021, when it

2022, G9 again shut down access to the terminal, this time in response to the Henry government's decision to end fuel subsidies, producing a doubling of fuel prices.

by November 2022, gangs were essentially engaged in open fights for territory across the capital city, although faced with the prospect of foreign military intervention, the gang begun to cease some of their blockades.. This included an ongoing bloody struggle between the G9 and Family and G-PEP coalition for control of key terrain in both the north and south of the city—including a coordinated attack by the “5 Seconds” and “Canaan” gangs to control the strategically located Moulins d' Haiti flour mill and from it, control over a strategic chokepoint of Highway 1, key for access to the capital. 400 Mawozo reportedly uses its control over the neighborhood of the suburb of Croix-des-Bouquets—strategically situated on the route connecting Port-au-Prince with a strategic border crossing into the Dominican Republic—to extort the flow of people and goods along that route. The principal objective in each case is to dominate the routes along which international aid and remittances flow, together with extorting as much of possible of the dwindling flows of value in the country.

Complicating matters further, Haiti is also experiencing a new cholera outbreak, centered in Port-au-Prince and nearby Cité Soleil—with thousands becoming sick in recent weeks—highlighting the poor state of the public sanitation system, potable water, and other infrastructure.

Impact on the Region

Few expect that sending a new international “reaction force” to Haiti will solve the country's problems more than the United States and international efforts in the past—yet none can afford to do nothing—for good conscience or political expediency. Beyond Haiti itself, the crisis has increasingly become a

and other neighbors through refugee flows, diseases such as cholera, illicit activities including the “guns for marijuana” trade with neighboring Jamaica, and other issues.

Arguably, the neighbor most directly affected by Haiti has been the Dominican Republic—which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti—including a 391-kilometer-long land border. Faced with the deteriorating situation of its neighbor, the leadership of the Dominican Republic has clamored unsuccessfully for more international attention to the problem. The outmigration of desperate Haitians to work in, or conduct informal trade with the Dominican Republic—and to a degree—the criminal activities of groups in Haiti, has led to spillover of criminality and violence on the Dominican side, including an increase in kidnappings in the country.

The Dominican government has often been criticized by the international community for its treatment of Haitians in the country.

As the situation in Haiti has become more severe, the Dominican Republic has moved from augmenting its security force controlling the border with Haiti, *Cuerpo Especializado en Seguridad Fronteriza Terrestre* (CESFRONT), to constructing a 164-kilometer-long physical wall, begun in February 2022, to restrict the flow of immigrants.

Recommendations

A new multinational reaction force in Haiti is arguably the most viable among a poor list of available options to break the control of gangs over the flow of relief supplies into the country and mitigate the deepening, grave humanitarian crisis. The request for such help by Haiti’s President Ariel Henry gives such a force the pretext of legitimacy, although the long-overdue elections to replace the un-elected Henry raise additional issues. The U.S. and possible United

be useful in signaling international displeasure, but are unlikely to impact the situation on the ground in Haiti.

Besides such issues, the resistance by U.N. Security Council members People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia to a United Nations force, undermines any effort to create a force under Chapter Seven of the United Nations Charter. A request to the international community to contribute troops for an international force received no offers, compounded by the reluctance of the U.S. to commit its troops to such a force.

The experience of the U.S. in Afghanistan and Iraq stands as further reminders of the limits and perils in attempting to re-engineer a dysfunctional country, even with the dedication of enormous resources.

The combination of concerns, reluctance to contribute forces, and the less than successful results of past interventions in Haiti and elsewhere all emphasize that the role of any new international force sent to Haiti be as limited as possible. Policymakers and all involved must continually monitor the force to ensure that it is focused narrowly on ensuring the flow of humanitarian supplies and acting against the gangs only where they try to impede those flows.

As a separate matter from such an international force, the U.S. and other interested actors may wish to help strengthen the Haitian National Police, including replacing damaged or stolen vehicles and other equipment. It may also possibly wish to aid the Haitian military to fight gangs and other problems of insecurity. Consistent with U.S. law and past practice, the U.S. and others contributing must do so in a controlled manner, carefully ensuring that the trained units are free of human rights abuses, do not engage in corruption, or in ways that deliberately favor one gang over another.

Congress, amply monitored by international observers. The U.S. should not, however, rush to elections in Haiti as a panacea for the country's problems. Although counterintuitive—to best serve democracy—such elections should occur only when the conditions are in place to ensure that the people can safely express their true preferences without the results being either corrupted by those who control the process or distorted through dominance by the gangs of the neighborhoods where people live and their access to voting places.

The resolution of Haiti's deep-rooted and mutually reinforcing problems of corruption, poverty, dysfunctional institutions, and political culture in Haiti will not be solved in the short term by international intervention. Nonetheless, the international community arguably has a duty to Haiti and its neighbors to prevent the escalation of harm, while acting in a limited fashion that avoids making the situation worse. As they act, U.S. and others in the international community should be clear regarding those limits and manage expectations accordingly.

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