

Haitians Turn to Mob Justice as the Gang Threat Festers

7 July marks the second anniversary of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse's assassination. In this Q&A, Crisis Group expert Diego Da Rin explains why insecurity has gripped Haiti since the murder and why some Haitians have turned to self-defence groups to fend off rising gang power.

Two years after the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, how unsafe is Haiti?

The power vacuum that followed the [assassination](#) of President Jovenel Moïse in July 2021 has spawned the most extreme bout of violence in Haiti's living memory. The UN Secretary-General [recently warned](#) that insecurity in the capital Port-au-Prince had "reached levels comparable to countries in armed conflict". In 2022, homicides rose more than 30 per cent from the previous year, with nearly [2,200](#) people killed. The number of women murdered rose 75 per cent, from 93 to 163. 2023 could prove even more deadly: in April, the steady upsurge in gang violence killed over [600 people](#). Close to [400 cases of kidnapping](#) were documented in the first three months of the year, up 72 per cent from 2022.

Most of this violence can be attributed to gangs, which have grown stronger and expanded their turf. While for decades they were confined to big-city slums, they now control 80 per cent of Port-au-Prince, which is home to some three million people, as well as the main routes into the capital. Around the city's largest ports, gangs frequently hijack freight trucks and have blockaded Haiti's main oil terminal on two occasions, creating fuel shortages that have had terrible [effects](#) on a country with an extremely unreliable electrical grid. Gang rule over stretches of key roads has also disrupted supply chains and increased the costs of transporting goods, driving up food prices for an already impoverished population and exhausting stores of essential items. Around half of all Haitians are now considered food insecure. Most of the [165,000 internally displaced persons](#) in the country have fled their homes because of gang violence. The gangs have also gained a firmer foothold outside Port-au-Prince, mainly in the Artibonite Valley, an agricultural zone vital for the country's food supply that lies just north of the capital.

Violence tends to reach its heights along the battlefronts separating rival gang territories. In Cité Soleil, a slum located north of the capital, snipers from the gang coalition known as the G9 Family frequently [shoot indiscriminately](#) at civilians living in the Brooklyn neighbourhood, which is held by a rival alliance, the Gpèp. The G9 has also periodically shut down the only remaining road to this neighbourhood, preventing people from travelling to work and school, impeding collection of the waste that flows into the area from the capital, and interrupting the supply of food and drinking water. This lethal combination of garbage and lack of potable water contributed to the resurgence of cholera in the autumn of 2022.

What accounts for the gangs' rising power?

Several factors have allowed gangs to establish a stranglehold in Haiti. Historically, gangs have fostered close ties with politicians and powerful businesspeople – who offered them funding, weapons and legal protection. But as they have become more adept at rackets such as extortion and kidnapping for ransom, the gangs have also become far more self-reliant, spending less time and energy serving the interests of their erstwhile sponsors. With greater independence, gangs have sought to expand their wealth and power through increasingly brutal displays of violence to entrench their control of communities from which they extract resources. State institutions provide little to no check on crime: many were already starved of resources and meaningful authority at the time of Moïse's assassination and have become even weaker since. Gangs have accordingly scaled up their predation with little resistance.

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Gangs have also grown stronger in recent years by creating alliances with other armed groups, giving rise to some [seven major coalitions](#) that are today fighting for supremacy throughout the country. As they seek to expand, these gang coalitions increasingly [target civilians](#), punishing those suspected of collaborating with rival groups and instilling fear among residents through kidnapping, extortion and illegal road tolls. Armed groups have been looting and torching houses, mutilating and murdering people, and burning bodies in plain sight. Gangs also use [sexual violence](#) – including systematic collective rape, especially of women, girls and LGBTQI+ people – to subjugate the local population.

What is the Bwa Kale self-defence movement?

Bwa Kale – or “peeled wood”, in Haitian Creole – refers to the self-defence groups that have mushroomed to counter Haiti’s gangs. The name comes from an expression first used by demonstrators during the mass protests against interim Prime Minister Ariel Henry in 2022. It is now used to describe an uprising of people intent on preventing gangs from taking over their neighbourhoods. The spike in vigilantism [dates](#) to 24 April, when rumour spread of an imminent large-scale attack by gang members in Port-au-Prince. As panic grew, the police intercepted a mini-bus in Canapé-Vert, a neighbourhood in the capital’s southern outskirts, where a number of individuals were carrying weapons, supposedly for use by gangs. The news spread fast, and a crowd gathered around the suspected gang members, throwing stones at them and setting them on fire while several were still alive, killing thirteen of them.

Footage of the attack went viral on social media and appears to have inspired copycat violence: numerous lynchings were reported in different parts of the capital over the following days. Emboldened by these events, as well as by news of the death of powerful gang leader Ti Makak on the same day, increasing numbers of people set up and joined vigilante groups to defend themselves from gang attacks in their neighbourhoods. In April alone, international organisations recorded [164 cases](#) of mob killings and lynchings of alleged gang members. “ While the Bwa Kale movement has captured international attention in recent months, vigilantism has a long track record in Haiti. ”

While the Bwa Kale movement has captured international attention in recent months, vigilantism has a long track record in Haiti. Groups known as “vigilance brigades” [have existed for decades](#); they tend to become active during periods of political instability or after natural disasters in response to the perceived inability of state security forces to protect civilians. A [UN report](#) documented nearly 500 lynchings between 2012 and 2015, a period in which the country was coping with the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy as well as a cholera outbreak. Even before the recent spike, there were 75 episodes of vigilante attacks in the first three months of 2023 alone, [according](#) to the UN Human Rights Office. Politicians and civil society groups did not uniformly appeal for citizens to stand down. Indeed, in a [press release](#) issued in early March, the justice minister pointed to constitutional provisions allowing citizens to defend themselves in cases of break-ins and pillage; two weeks later, eighteen Haitian civil society organisations [appealed](#) to citizens to form self-defence groups to prevent gangs from seizing more territory.

Vigilante groups appear to be made up primarily of young volunteers and, so far, are loosely organised. Sources tell Crisis Group that although some of these groups communicate with one another, there is no evidence of either systematic cooperation between brigades in different neighbourhoods or a vertical chain of command directing operations. Members are responsible for setting up checkpoints at strategic locations outside certain towns or districts where they have erected barricades. They check identity documents and frisk people coming in and out to ensure that no armed individuals enter the area under their watch. These brigades enforce curfews that residents informally agree to and also carry out patrols in groups of over a dozen people. Their members receive no formal remuneration, but residents often provide them with food, machetes and cigarettes.

There has been some informal collaboration between vigilantes and state security forces. Police representatives welcome what they call a “[marriage](#)” [between the people and the force](#) to fight gangs. Sources contacted by Crisis Group affirm that serving or former police officers who live in the neighbourhoods defended by the self-defence brigades have informally joined the vigilance rounds and, on occasion, have permitted the groups to make use of their weapons. Lingering distrust of the police, however, has so far hindered a more systematic partnership between vigilantes and the force.

In other areas, civilians have formed alliances with armed groups to fend off certain gangs. For example, in villages across the Artibonite Valley, locals have supported a gang coalition led by a leader known as Ti Mépris in fighting other groups, including Gran Grif, Kokorat San Ras and smaller ones, trying to expand their turf. Given the lack of police presence in this area, officials say, locals have no choice but to team up with the groups led by Ti Mépris, who they believe will protect them from attacks by rival bands.

What have been the effects of the rise of Bwa Kale?

The rise of the Bwa Kale movement correlates to an apparent diminution in gang violence. While gangs had ramped up kidnappings to a record high in the first months of 2023, [a study](#) by the Centre for Analysis and Research in Human Rights found that kidnappings have fallen sharply since 24 April, likely reflecting the emergence of the self-defence groups. The study also shows that homicides and other gang-related crimes have dropped a great deal since the movement surfaced. Without the Bwa Kale movement, said several Haitian commentators interviewed by Crisis Group, the gangs would have continued to expand until they achieved control of the entire capital and its surroundings. The risk of facing unbridled violence has meant that many gangs have retreated into their strongholds for the first time in recent years.

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Following years of worsening insecurity, it is unsurprising that the movement has won the support of so many Haitians, who have cheered on a campaign led by citizens otherwise abandoned to their fate by the state. Political groups such as the [Montana Accord](#) – a broad coalition of political and civil society groups that support what they call a “Haitian-led solution” to the crisis – have [encouraged](#) the vigilante movement, stressing that the right to legitimate self-defence is sacred, while also warning that these groups should refrain from running amok. Some state officials, on the other hand, have tried to discourage Haitians from joining the Bwa Kale, even though the lowering of violence has given the government some respite. Notably, following the lynching in Canapé-Vert acting Prime Minister Henry [called on civilians](#) not to take justice into their own hands, urging them instead to work hand in hand with police by providing information to enable the arrest of gang members.

Some figures are also trying to exploit the movement’s popularity to gain prominence. One of them is Marcelin Mertil, an activist close to Martine Moïse, wife of the slain president, who has been shown in [numerous videos](#) distributing large quantities of machetes in some of the capital’s poorest neighbourhoods. Even the leader of the G9 gang coalition, Jimmy “Barbecue” Chérizier, is striving to turn the movement in his favour, asserting that the gangs he represents [fully support](#) Bwa Kale. Chérizier is trying to craft an image as a politician serving the people; he has [claimed](#) that the armed coalition he leads is not involved in kidnapping, despite the [ample record](#) of vicious crimes committed by his followers.

What explains the Haitian security forces’ failure to curb the gangs?

The Bwa Kale movement’s ascendance has occurred against the backdrop of a complete failure of Haitian law enforcement to address gang violence. This failure is, in turn, the result of a larger collapse of the state. There have been no elections since 2016, which means that since January there are no publicly elected officials serving in Haiti. Most state services are barely functioning, and judges, doctors, teachers and state electricity company staff have gone on long strikes to demand increases and timely payment of their salaries.

Efforts to expand the size and improve the operational capabilities of the Haitian National Police have failed to match the scale of criminality that the country is facing. There is no question that the gangs have the upper hand. Since the beginning of the year, three police stations have been ransacked and burned or totally destroyed by gang members, and [29 policemen](#) have been brutally murdered, often with pictures of the dead bodies posted on social media platforms by gangs. Police officers' demands for better equipment and more high-calibre weapons have not been met, despite reported progress in bolstering special police units.

A large number of police officers have abandoned their posts, while some have also tried to leave the country. The newly appointed UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Haiti, Maria Isabel Salvador, [reported](#) that the police force is down to roughly 9,000 officers, with just 3,500 on active duty throughout the country at any given time. Only 1,300 new officers have been recruited and trained over the past three years. High attrition rates have left the force far short of the more than 25,000 police officers that Haiti should have to meet the police-to-population ratio recommended by [UN missions](#). The police's lack of effectiveness is compounded by members' collusion with gangs: experts have [estimated](#) that about half of the total force has links to illegal armed groups.

Is Bwa Kale a solution to Haiti's violence?

There are no good options for dealing with the country's security crisis, but vigilantism is not the answer. For one thing, vigilante efforts are very unlikely to bring the gangs to heel. While the self-defence groups have thus far had some success preventing armed groups from extending their territorial reach, local civil society representatives tell Crisis Group that they are unlikely to be able to push gangs from their bastions, namely the areas most affected by gang violence. As a person living in a Port-au-Prince neighbourhood controlled by one of the most powerful gangs told Crisis Group: "Here, the slightest sign of reaction against them leads to death".

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Also, the gangs are showing signs of starting to push back against the Bwa Kale movement and have begun again to expand their territorial control. In less than a week, the Kraze Baryè gang has reportedly ransacked and set ablaze the [private residences of two former members of parliament](#), as well as the [premises of the Jamaican consulate](#), located less than 2km from the U.S. embassy in Port-au-Prince. Gang leader Johnson André, aka Izo 5 Secondes, recently [issued threats](#) against the inhabitants of several neighbourhoods that have joined the Bwa Kale movement. These threats should not be taken lightly. André was involved in the 19 April massacre [by armed groups](#) in Source-Matelas, a village where about 100 civilians were killed in reprisal for setting up a vigilante brigade. Some observers worry that gangs will stage large-scale offensives against civilians to deter them from embarking on further resistance.

Moreover, even if they have shown signs of triumphing over the gangs, the vigilantes raise their own set of concerns. Human rights defenders and others worry about the further deterioration of the rule of law in Haiti. They are alarmed by the growth and popularity of the Bwa Kale movement, as well as the support (overt and tacit) it has received from many officials. They note that there are no safeguards to protect innocents from being summarily executed by self-defence squads, placing ordinary citizens at growing risk. For example, in their quest to find people linked to suspected gang members, civilians have seized the cell phones of lynching victims to search for their relatives, especially the women romantic partners of the armed men. In some cases, these individuals have subsequently been killed. Local human rights organisation staff told Crisis Group that they have opened investigations into multiple reports of vigilante violence against individuals with no gang ties.

What should be done?

Given the weakness of Haiti's security forces, it seems unlikely that the state will be able to curb violence on its own in the near future. Henry asked the UN Secretary-General in October 2022 for the deployment of specialised international forces to support the police. According to polling, this

course of action is half-heartedly [favoured by most Haitians](#), who remember the history of failed international interventions all too well, perceiving in it echoes of the painful colonial past, but see few other options for ending the country's appalling violence. The major operational risks involved in such a multinational deployment, however, have made Haiti's international partners reluctant to lead a mission of this kind. In a second [letter](#) sent to the UN in early June to reiterate his call for international special forces, Henry noted that a concrete UN proposal on the operational framework for such a mission – including details as to its composition, duration and funding – could help motivate foreign governments that remain undecided about dispatching troops. The UN Security Council is due to discuss the situation in Haiti at a meeting on 6 July, and sources have told Crisis Group that some delegations, possibly including the U.S., may try to use this occasion to discuss the possibility of sending a security mission.

That remains a tall order. Interventions in Haiti have a troubled history, and the UN Secretary-General himself [recently pointed out](#) that potential troop contributors are reluctant to send forces because of the political stalemate that has prevented the creation of a broader coalition to support the transitional regime. Crisis Group has [previously recommended](#) that forces not be deployed unless and until a critical mass of the country's main political forces reach an agreement on working together to form a transitional government – and commit to support the mission. Until that happens, donor countries are, correctly, looking for ways to provide more robust support to the Haitian National Police to help it re-establish a modicum of security as soon as possible.