

New Gang Battle Lines Scar Haiti as Political Deadlock Persists

Increasingly deadly turf wars between rival gang coalitions have revealed the depth of Haiti's political morass. In this Q&A, Crisis Group shows how the former and the latter are deeply intertwined.

What is behind the rising violence in Haiti, and how have security conditions changed since the president was assassinated in 2021?

Security in Haiti has deteriorated sharply since President Jovenel Moïse was shot to death inside his private residence in the early hours of 7 July 2021, with clashes between well-armed criminal gangs causing hundreds of violent deaths in recent months. It is still unclear who was behind the president's assassination. In the meantime, Haiti's gangs have exploited the instability created by his death to expand their territorial footprint beyond what they have held for decades. The turf wars have been brutal. Human rights organisations have said there were [more than 1,200 kidnappings](#) in 2021, almost twice the number reported in 2020 and five times more than in [2019](#). Homicides have increased by at least [17 per cent](#), but because of under-reporting the real number might be considerably higher.

Recent episodes of gang violence illustrate the severity of the security crisis. Clashes between 24 April and 6 May left at least 188 dead and displaced over 16,000 in the capital Port-au-Prince, which is home to nearly 3 million people. Gunfights that started on 7 July and raged for ten days in the nearby slums of Cité Soleil [have killed at least 300 people](#) and left some 160 wounded. The battles have intensified of late in the northern and north-eastern districts of Port-au-Prince, threatening to cut off the capital from the rest of the country. A tense calm has allowed the mayor of Cité Soleil to open a humanitarian corridor and UN agencies have started delivering aid to the most vulnerable residents there, but sources worry that the violence could restart at any moment. Clashes are hindering traffic on two of the roads that connect Port-au-Prince with the northern states, while fighting has already blocked a third one leading to the south. On 10 June, members of the gang Village de Dieu [seized](#) the Court of First Instance of Port-au-Prince, the largest court in the country. The Haitian National Police have not yet tried to regain control of the courthouse, fuelling rumours that the gangs may seek to take over other public buildings, including the [Haitian parliament](#). “Many in Haiti see [Prime Minister Henry] as the face of continuity for an entrenched system of political corruption.”

There are few brakes on the gangs' growth and no impediments in sight given politicians' failure to create a legitimate government since Moïse's assassination. With international backing, Ariel Henry has acted as interim prime minister since July 2021, but many in Haiti see him as the [face of continuity](#) for an entrenched system of political corruption. Haitian law enforcement officers have [leaked](#) reports accusing Henry of obstructing the investigation into Moïse's death, going so far as to suggest that the acting premier has direct links to the murder's masterminds, which he denies. The so-called [Montana Accord](#), a coalition of over 180 political parties and civil society organisations, is challenging Henry's mandate, instead proposing a “Haitian-led solution” involving a two-year transitional government formed by representatives of different social sectors. Discussions between Henry and Accord members have yielded no agreement.

Amid the power vacuum, the gangs have been able to kill, kidnap and extort with little resistance from the state. Sources told Crisis Group that gang leaders aim to consolidate control of populous neighbourhoods before new elections are scheduled so they can coerce residents to vote for certain candidates, assuring them a valuable negotiating tool with politicians.

Which are the main gangs in Haiti, and why are they fighting?

There are around 200 [gangs](#) across Haiti, 95 of which operate in metropolitan Port-au-Prince. The gangs have historically established strongholds in the capital's overcrowded slums. These neighbourhoods are of great political value because of their large populations and remain easy to defend from state security forces due to their [lack of urban planning](#): their narrow, unpaved roads are difficult for vehicles to navigate. The gangs often use civilians as human shields when the security forces do attempt to enter. Beyond the capital and its vicinity, gangs have also [established footholds](#) in cities such as Cap Haïtien, Gonaïves, Les Cayes, Jérémie and Jacmel – all densely populated ports connected to main roads.

Many of Haiti's gangs have coalesced around two main alliances: the G9 an Fanmi e Alye, also known as the G9, headed by former police officer Jimmy "Barbecue" Chérizier, and the GPèp la, also known as the Gpèp, led by Gabriel Jean Pierre, alias "Ti Gabriel". The G9 was officially created in June 2020, when the heads of nine major Port-au-Prince gangs formed a coalition, with the aim of establishing armed supremacy. After extending an invitation to all of Cité Soleil's gangs to join, they launched a coordinated attack on those who said no. The next month, Ti Gabriel, leader of the gang Nan Brooklyn, gathered all the refusers under the Gpèp banner. "Gangs have decapitated opponents in public, burnt corpses on the street, set fire to houses and used sexual violence to intimidate residents out of collaborating with their rivals. "

A two-party gang war on numerous fronts has thus superseded the old local rivalries, as the G9 and Gpèp vie for overall ascendancy. The Gpèp has gradually expanded into a broader alliance beyond Cité Soleil to resist the G9's rise. Fighting has spread, with civilians stuck at home to stay out of the crossfire. Gangs have decapitated opponents in public, burnt corpses on the street, set fire to houses and used sexual violence to intimidate residents out of collaborating with their rivals. The effects of this violence are increasingly pernicious. The blockage of Route 2, the road connecting Port-au-Prince to the south, has also hampered humanitarian groups trying to reach victims of the earthquake that destroyed southern cities in August 2021.

Until April, the [most powerful](#) gang in Port-au-Prince, 400 Mawozo, stayed on the sidelines, but it has now joined the battle. Having built its power around the commune of Croix-de-Bouquets, on the capital's north-eastern outskirts, this gang attained international notoriety when it kidnapped seventeen Christian missionaries from the U.S. and Canada in 2021. Coordinated attacks involving the Gpèp's Cité Soleil gangs and 400 Mawozo in April indicate that they have sealed an alliance of convenience. Sources tell Crisis Group that 400 Mawozo's assistance has been vital to preventing the G9 from scoring a quick victory over Gpèp, which it would otherwise overpower.

What is the relationship among criminal gangs, political power and wealth?

Politicians and the business elite in Haiti have historically relied on gangs to obtain and exert power, but the criminals have grown more autonomous in recent years. While powerful paramilitary organisations controlled by the executive branch date back to the Duvalier dictatorship (1957-1986), the organisations that engendered today's gangs were born during the second presidency of Jean Bertrand Aristide between 2001 and 2004. During those years, young people, primarily from the poor neighbourhoods of northern Port-au-Prince, [formed](#) extralegal armed groups known as *chimères* to help consolidate the power of Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas party, as well as to deter his adversaries from ousting him. Aristide was unpopular with Haitian elites and former members of the armed forces, which he had disbanded in 1995 (during his first presidency) out of concern that they might impede the consolidation of democracy by attempting a coup d'état.

Moïse did not hesitate in using the gangs to his political advantage. To cope with [massive demonstrations](#), which broke out in July 2018 after the government announced a sharp hike in fuel prices, and which continued for two years in response to corruption scandals, high-ranking officials – including at the Interior Ministry – [reportedly](#) helped plan three massacres of dissenters. Gang members, allegedly protected by Haitian National Police officers, killed at least 240 people in La Saline, Bel-Air and Cité Soleil, three poor neighbourhoods of Port-au-Prince seen as hotbeds of anti-Moïse unrest. U.S. authorities and human rights organisations have [accused](#) G9 leader Chérizier, who was until 2018 part of a special police unit, of being behind these attacks. Moïse and his allies [denied](#) accusations of links to the G9 or involvement in the massacres. The

spokesperson for the state's National Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Commission, which the late president reactivated in 2019 to [promote](#) gangs' disarmament, did [say](#) that the reorganisation of the gangs, which has empowered the criminal groups, took place after the Commission had encouraged gang leaders to form a coalition to facilitate negotiations with the government.

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Notwithstanding their links to Haiti's elites, criminal groups [have not tended](#) to be motivated by political considerations. Most of these alliances have been rooted in an exchange of benefits: elites use gang violence to suppress political opposition, influence electoral outcomes and secure economic monopolies; the gangs use their elite connections to secure funding, weapons and ammunition, as well as impunity for their crimes. Although the gangs have diversified their sources of financing, which today include ransom from kidnappings, extortion of businesses, such as public transport companies, and profits from arms and drug trafficking, they have continued to rely on businessmen for subventions and on politicians for shelter from police and justice investigations.

These relations, however, have been subtly shifting in recent months. The military might behind the G9 coalition appears to have fed Chérizier's desire for political power. In a [video](#) that went viral on social media, he stated that the G9 was a revolutionary force opposed to the whole political establishment (excluding, apparently, Moïse, whom he [deemed](#) a protector of the poor). A few days after Moïse's murder, heavily armed men belonging to the G9, followed by hundreds of people, [paraded](#) through the streets of Port-au-Prince to pay tribute to the president, while Chérizier affirmed that his death would be avenged. On 17 October 2021, his men [forced](#) Henry and his security detail to flee an official commemoration, and later that day, blocked access to the country's largest oil terminal. The blockage would last almost a month, creating severe fuel shortages in Port-au-Prince and other cities. Chérizier demanded that the prime minister resign, and while Henry did not step down, the government entered negotiations with the G9 about [resuming](#) fuel deliveries. The terms of their eventual agreement were never made public.

Why have the Haitian police been unable to curb the gangs' growth? What needs to be done to make the security responses more effective?

The Haitian National Police, the sole state security force mandated to tackle criminal violence, has fallen woefully short in that task. It was created in 1995, the same year that Aristide disbanded the armed forces. The National Police has more than ten specialised units to combat organised crime, but they face various obstacles in their anti-gang efforts. Alongside MINUSTAH, the UN peacekeeping force that operated from 2004 to 2017, the police units did indeed reduce violent crime in hotspots around Port-au-Prince. But they did not succeed in dismantling the gangs, partly because there was no successful social reintegration campaign for gang members, most of whom hung onto their guns.

Now, despite tens of millions of dollars of assistance over the past 25 years, the Haitian police find themselves under-equipped, outgunned and underpaid. Since the UN mission ended, the police have failed to expand their ranks: with under 16,000 officers on the job, the police-to-population [ratio](#) is lower than what UN missions recommend. Washington has lifted the arms embargo it established in the mid-1990s, but the executive branch still has to notify Congress of any sales and there are no plans afoot to sell weapons to the Haitian police. Gang members, by contrast, [have no problem acquiring](#) sophisticated high-calibre weapons on the black market.

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As Crisis Group has [noted](#), collusion between state security forces and illegal armed groups has flourished in the absence of political will to hold corrupt officers accountable and because of the efforts of those in power to deploy the police (as well as gangs) to serve their personal interests. An expert with close knowledge of the way the Haitian police operate believes that about 40 per cent of officers are directly or indirectly connected to gangs. A case in point is G9 leader Chérizier, who frequently points out that he served for fourteen years as a police officer. In fact, Chérizier headed a

notorious gang, the Delmas 6, for several months, [while still serving as an agent of a special police unit](#) devoted to fighting criminal groups. Collusion is not just financially motivated. For many police officers, working with gangs is a matter of survival: many of them live in poor neighbourhoods controlled by armed groups, and though they might not have chosen to collaborate with gangs, confronting them would lead to certain death.

Although the police force has been largely incapable of responding to the security threats facing Haiti, there are a few exceptions worth noting. In the immediate aftermath of Moïse's assassination, the police were quick to [arrest over 40](#) suspects. While none of them have been brought to trial, it demonstrated that, when they want to, the police can move fast. The police have also systematically [targeted](#) the 400 Mawozo gang, reducing its capacity to carry out kidnappings for ransom, its main source of financing.

What kind of assistance could Haiti's international partners provide to mitigate and prevent further violence?

Haiti's partners should step up their financial and technical support aimed at bolstering the security forces, which have grown noticeably weaker over the past year: in May, the National Police's director [acknowledged](#) that more than 1,000 officers have recently abandoned their posts because of their [precarious](#) working and living conditions. A comprehensive revamp of the police will require strengthening their intelligence gathering, creating a specialised [anti-gang task force](#), which is already in the works, and reinforcing oversight structures to address [gang infiltration](#). International partners should also ramp up efforts to stop arms smuggling into Haiti. Over the last month, authorities have [intercepted](#) four shipments of arms in Port-au-Prince and Port-de-Paix, all coming from the U.S. These operations come in the wake of the dismissal of the Haitian customs agency director, who is being investigated on charges of arms trafficking and money laundering. Ports have until recently faced [little scrutiny](#) from state authorities, but international cooperation agreements on this front could help the Haitian state expand its oversight over shipments.

A strategy focused solely on security, however, is insufficient. Crisis Group has [recommended](#) that donors consider supporting a specialised office, buttressed by international partners, to help stymie corruption in the police force and overcome the impunity enjoyed by political and business elites. Over the long term, a demobilisation process that offers an off-ramp to gang members and real livelihood alternatives will also be an indispensable step toward reducing violence. These policies, however, are expensive to implement and Haiti – the Western Hemisphere's poorest country – is facing a harrowing economic crisis, with donor funding in short supply. A UN Development Programme [initiative](#) creating a multi-donor fund to bolster the security force's operational and intelligence-gathering capacity has raised less than one third of its \$28 million funding target, though the U.S. government recently [announced](#) an additional \$48 million in security assistance. “Haitians resent what they perceive as a long history of foreign intervention.”

Beyond the financial costs, the appropriate dimension of foreign support remains a matter of great controversy in Haiti. Haitians [resent](#) what they perceive as a long history of foreign intervention that, at best, has little to show for it – and, at worst, has hurt their country. Animosity is particularly fierce toward the UN, after departing MINUSTAH soldiers [abandoned](#) hundreds of girls and women whom they had impregnated. The UN has also refused to pay compensation after its peacekeepers inadvertently [started](#) a bout of cholera that killed over 10,000. There is no love lost either between many Haitians and the current UN political mission BINUH, which critics say has “[miserably failed](#)” as the political, economic and security situation has only got worse on its watch. Haitian civil society organisations have also [accused](#) the country's Core Group (of which the UN is a member, alongside the ambassadors from Germany, Brazil, Canada, Spain, the U.S., France, the EU and a representative from the Organisation of American States) of perpetuating a corrupt regime by supporting Henry's government.

Despite [calls](#) from civil society organisations to end its mandate, the UN Security Council renewed BINUH for another year in a 15 July [resolution](#), directing it to focus on helping Haitian authorities to address the country's political and security crises. In addition to requesting that member states prohibit arms trafficking to Haiti, the resolution threatened sanctions against those who engage or

support gang activity. In the days preceding the vote, a number of countries expressed support in private for an international police mission in Haiti, though the details of what that would look like remain fuzzy. External actors interested in this option will need to step cautiously – taking into account local animosity toward foreign intervention and the UN’s compromised reputation in Haiti – and should focus first on how to strengthen the force’s independence and integrity.

The Security Council also reiterated the need for urgent agreement on a political process that leads to free and fair elections, acknowledging that “breaking links between political and economic actors and gangs” must be a priority. But it did not ask BINUH to work on this latter issue, and questions linger as to which international body, if any, could lead this effort, meaning that the main source of international pressure and support is likely to be bilateral partners. As Crisis Group’s Deputy Program Director for Latin America, Renata Segura, [has argued in *Foreign Affairs*](#), Haiti cannot become a significantly safer place unless and until it addresses its political turmoil. Much of the state is in shambles: because of postponed elections, only one third of Senate seats are filled, the lower house is entirely empty and the Supreme Court is not functioning. Operating outside the constitutional framework, these weak institutions cannot even aspire to a monopoly on violence. It is urgent that Henry and the Montana Accord members negotiate a consensus that allows a stable transitional government to come into being with a realistic timetable for elections, and Haiti’s foreign partners should press upon them the urgency of doing so. Until that happens, the gangs will only continue to get stronger and Haitians will face a grim future.

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