

Haiti's gang violence keeps a population captive

'The people in Cité Soleil need a break. We just want to live life like everyone else.'



Less than two years after Haiti's president was assassinated in his home, a stranglehold of gang violence has made life for millions of residents all but impossible as national security forces struggle to contain it.

Hunger levels and humanitarian needs are rising. But some [60%](#) of the capital, Port-au-Prince, as well as humanitarian access roads to areas further afield, are reportedly controlled by the armed groups. Residents and aid workers say this is keeping populations captive – unable to access food, medical care, and other essential services.

The country has no more elected officials, after the terms of 10 remaining elected senators expired in January.

After visiting Haiti this month, the UN high commissioner for human rights, Volker Türk, said the international community needed to “urgently consider” sending a “specialised armed force”, as requested by the government, to help a population confronted by a “living nightmare of gang violence”.

Canada [announced](#) on 16 February it was stationing two warships off the Haitian coast to conduct “surveillance” and to “assist the Haitian national police in their efforts to control gang activity”. The Jamaican government has also previously expressed its willingness to participate in an international force, as requested by Port-au-Prince.

But growing discussions of international involvement to address the gang violence are complicated by Haiti's disruptive [colonial legacy](#). For residents in gang-controlled neighbourhoods, the

relationship with international forces in the country has been a complex one.

Ovila Thimot, a 29-year-old street vendor in Cité Soleil, a densely populated impoverished commune gripped by the gang violence, told Geneva Solutions that in spite of having been raped by a soldier who was a UN peacekeeper sent in following a massive [2010 earthquake](#), things were better than they are now.

“I’m not a big fan of the United Nations, but the country was stable,” she said. “We did not have this gang violence going on. A lot of people are scared to talk, but the people in Cité Soleil need a break. We just want to live life like everyone else, by providing for our kids, and giving them better opportunities.”

“It would be best if the UN sent MINUSTAH back here so people can go on with their lives freely,” she added, referring to the acronym of the international peacekeeping mission that exited the country in 2017. A [2019 study](#) said sexual exploitation and abuse by the peacekeepers had left women and under-aged girls impregnated.

Needs, response, and roadblocks

Haiti is among the world’s most vulnerable countries to disasters, including hurricanes and earthquakes, such as the one that shook the southwest a few months after President Jovenel Moïse’s July 2021 assassination.

Since 2021, gangs have moved from controlling not only critical southern roads to quake-hit areas, but also holding sway over northbound routes, Christian Cricboom, head of the Haiti office for the UN’s humanitarian aid coordination arm, OCHA, told Geneva Solutions.

“The situation has become more and more complicated. There are days when it is really impossible to operate, and difficult to get around,” said Cricboom, who coordinates the distribution of UN aid within the country.

According to the [UN](#), some 65% of Cité Soleil’s population of [at least 300,000 people](#) suffer from high levels of food insecurity, including 5% who need urgent humanitarian assistance.

Nationwide, some 4.7 million of Haiti’s roughly 11.5 million residents are threatened with acute hunger, including 2.4 million children.

Alexandre Marcou of Médecins Sans Frontières in Haiti described how neighbourhoods in Cité Soleil, such as Brooklyn, have become “landlocked” by surrounding gangs, forcing patients who need urgent medical care to risk their lives to find assistance.

In late 2022, for example, a shortage of fuel worsened the sanitary situation in vulnerable neighbourhoods, with water trucks unable to access areas as uncollected garbage obstructed roads. Cholera spread and many health facilities closed in part as a result of fuel price hikes.

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One patient, who had gone to an MSF clinic in Cité Soleil that did not have a maternity ward, died in an ambulance as it drove from one closed hospital to another in search of care.

“These sort of things happen every day,” Marcou said.

The restrictions keep residents like Thimot locked in their neighbourhoods, with basic necessities even harder to reach.

“If you're from the lower part of Cité Soleil, you can't go to the upper level because of different gangs,” she said.

“I get up every day to try to earn a living to feed my 11-year-old son,” she continued, speaking about her child who was born after the abuse she endured. “Life is very hard now, with gang violence and women being raped, and too many people are dying. There's no school; no hospital. We don't even have water to shower or to drink.”

Way forward

Jose Ulysse, founder of the Centre Hospitalier de Fontaine, a hospital in Cité Soleil, takes a mixed view of what the international community's years of involvement in Haiti have achieved.

He told Geneva Solutions that while not much has been achieved “on the political side” by the UN, including through the 13-year-long deployment of MINUSTAH, the global organisation has contributed to health and education in the country.

“My vision is to have a safe environment and better financial opportunities so our young men and women would not leave the country in search of a better life in other countries.”

But Ulysse said the responsibility for the current quagmire is a shared one. “I do not believe the international community takes us seriously, because we are the gravediggers of our own nation,” he said. The hospital partners with international NGOs and has received support from UNICEF; the UN's migration agency, IOM; and the US Red Cross, Ulysse said.

Meanwhile, Jeanty Fils Exalus, communications director in Haiti's health ministry, told Geneva Solutions that while his department is receiving international support, better education is needed.

“My vision is to have a safe environment and better financial opportunities so our young men and women would not leave the country in search of a better life in other countries,” he said.

Since 2021, Haitians have been one of the top nationalities embarking on [dangerous migration](#) routes to the United States. According to IOM, the number of internally displaced Haitians rose to [113,000](#) by August 2022, mostly due to a large spike of those forced from their homes by gang violence in the capital.

In a recent [survey](#) by an alliance of private sector groups, more than 70% of respondents in Haiti said they felt that the national police was incapable of resolving the crisis of gang violence on their own, while 69% were favourable to an international force.

OCHA's Cricboom said the priority now is to re-establish a secure environment, allowing Haitians to recover and move forward with their lives.

“Today, the situation is so catastrophic for Haitians that they think first about their survival,” Cricboom said. “Their first concern is to be able to work, to eat and to have some resources. Insecurity is the number one issue.”

Cité Soleil resident Thimot, whose son is a living reminder of past interventions, said she feels forgotten: “People don't care about people from Cité Soleil,” she said. “You should come and see the situations we're in.”