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Haiti: Wave of Violence Deepens Crisis

Gangs Kill, Kidnap People, Take Over Courts as Repatriations Continue
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(New York) – A renewed wave of gang violence in Haiti has killed hundreds of people in recent weeks and further deepened the humanitarian, political, and human rights crisis in the country, Human Rights Watch said today. Concerned governments, including from Latin America, Europe, and the United States, should stop expelling people to the country and urgently support efforts by local civil society groups and United Nations agencies to ensure that Haitians have protection and access to justice.



Le 10 juin 2022, un gang connu sous le nom de « 5 Secondes » a pris d'assaut Palais de justice de Port-au-Prince.

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Since early July 2022, gangs have killed and kidnapped hundreds of people in Port-au-Prince, the United Nations reported, and taken control of the Palace of Justice, where the city's main court is located, further aggravating violence and hindering access to justice in the country. On July 15, the United Nations Security Council extended the mandate of United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti until July 2023, expanding the number of security officials in the country.

“While extending the mandate of the UN Office in Haiti is a positive step, other countries should do much more to support Haitian civil society groups and UN agencies as the crisis in the country deepens,” said César Muñoz, senior Americas researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Governments should increase their support for efforts to protect the population and to bolster their access to justice, and immediately stop sending people back to Haiti, until country conditions improve.”

According to the UN Integrated Office in Haiti, 540 people were kidnapped and more than 780 were killed between January and May 2022. In the last five months of 2021, 396 people were kidnapped and 668 killed.

Since July 7, a coalition of gangs known as “G-9 an Fanni e Alye” has been carrying out attacks on the Nan Brooklyn neighborhood in the Cité Soleil zone of Port-au-Prince, with the apparent objective of taking control of the area from another gang. Roughly 300 people have reportedly been killed, including 21 whose bodies were apparently burned, and 16 people have been reported missing, according to the National Human Rights Defense Network, a human rights group. The gangs also burned homes and used heavy machinery to demolish them, the group said, with 125 homes reportedly destroyed.

On June 10, a gang known as “5 Seconds” took control of Port-Au-Prince’s Palace of Justice. They forced judicial officials out, injured a prosecutor, and stole computers, desks, and other assets, the president of the National Association of Haitian Legal Clerks said.

The lack of hearings at the Palace of Justice and some other courts in Haiti means that thousands of people in pretrial detention have not been taken before a judge or been able to have their cases reviewed. Over 90 percent of the people held in Port-au-Prince detention centers are in pretrial detention and some are being held arbitrarily, as they have never been taken to a judge. Others have not heard about their cases for over a year.

Judicial officials and lawyers had been warning for years about the increasing levels of gang violence in the area surrounding the palace, which is in a neighborhood controlled by gangs, and calling for the courthouse to be moved elsewhere. The Association of Haitian Magistrates and the Office of Citizen Protection identified a building where the courthouse could be set up and has repeatedly asked the government to relocate it, but they have not received any response from authorities, the president of the association said.

The Palace of Justice had been largely inoperative since 2018 due to security risks. Officials had been going to the courthouse only to make copies of documents or receive new evidence, but hearings had been mostly suspended. “If officials went to the tribunal, they had to do it at their own risk, and dodging bullets,” a member of the Superior Council of the Judiciary said.

The gangs appear to have stolen or destroyed case files and evidence that, the president of the Association of Haitian Magistrates said, would be impossible to recover as Haitian courts do not have digital copies of files. The courts held evidence and files concerning multiple massacres committed since 2018 by gangs, as well as corruption, financial crimes, and homicides.

The police have been unable to recover control of the court, which the gang is patrolling and surveilling with drones, the Haitian Ombudsman said. The National Human Rights Defense Network said “5 Seconds” has not allowed strangers into the neighborhood.

Haitian authorities should take urgent steps to recover files, relocate the courthouse, and protect justice officials so that they can return to their work and assess the damage, Human Rights Watch said. The UN Integrated Office in Haiti, the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, and foreign

governments should work with Haitian authorities to improve protection for judges, prosecutors, and other justice officials and support the relocation of the courthouse.

Prisons in Haiti are overcrowded, provide little to no access to food, water, and medicine, and there have been multiple reports by Haitian rights groups and the Ombudsman's Office of cases of ill-treatment or torture by prison guards and of rape by other detainees.

The UN Integrated Office in Haiti documented 54 cases in which detainees died of causes related to malnutrition between January and April. Eight detainees died of these causes on June 23 in the Les Cayes prison, in southern Haiti. The prison holds 833 detainees, three times its capacity, and has little food and water because gangs have repeatedly blocked the road between Port-au-Prince and Les Cayes.

Haitian authorities should prioritize releasing people in arbitrary detention, ensure that courts can function effectively and review cases, and improve prison conditions, Human Rights Watch said. International actors should work with Haitian authorities to address these issues promptly.

As the deterioration of security and access to justice in Haiti accelerates, several countries continue repatriating people to the country. Over 19,000 people were expelled or deported to Haiti between January and June 2022, the vast majority from the United States, compared with almost 3,000 during the same period in 2021.

"Returns to Haiti are life-threatening and will continue to be so if country conditions do not improve," said Muñoz. "The United States and other governments should stop all repatriations and help set up a reintegration program to provide assistance and protection to those already repatriated."

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