Beyond the Massacre River

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The long-standing Haiti-Dominican Republic border tensions, driven by historical conflicts and migration, have worsened due to Haiti's Pittobert irrigation Canal project. The Dominican Republic (DR) responded with border closure, militarisation, visa restrictions, and mass deportations, deepening economic strain and diplomatic disputes.

Border tensions between Haiti and the Dominican Republic have long been a source of conflict, reflecting deep historical grievances, economic disparities, and complex migration patterns. Succeeding events in the 21st century have contributed to mass instability in Haiti, such as the devastating 2010 earthquake, the murder of President Jovenel Moïse in 2021,

and mass organised crimes committed on behalf of gangs, have led to an increasing number of asylum seekers entering the DR. This influx however, has intensified nationalist anti-Haitian sentiment and prompted a series of increasingly strict government policies.

A key flashpoint in these tensions is the dispute over the Massacre River Canal. The Massacre River—named after the 1937 Parsley Massacre of Haitians ordered by Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo—forms most of the Northern part of the Dominican-Haitian border, occupying areas in both nations. The river begins in the Cordillera Central of the DR, flows through Haiti, and ends in the Dominican province of Dajabón. Haiti's plan to build the Pittobert irrigation Canal aims to redirect water for agricultural use, affecting only about 2% of the country's farmland. This solution was reached upon grassroot efforts and overall tiredness as Haiti has been suffering from severe drought. Consequently, this project has provoked a fierce response from Dominican authorities, who view the project as a violation of long-standing bilateral agreements of the 1929 Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Arbitration, and a direct threat to national resources. In 2021, the Dominican Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a diplomatic note urging Haiti to immediately halt any construction that could disrupt the natural flow of the Massacre River. Citing Article 10 of the Treaty of Peace, it emphasised both nations' commitment to avoiding actions that could alter the river's course or water output.

For Haitians, the Pittobert Canal represents national pride, dignity, sovereignty, and food security, particularly due to the country's heavy reliance on agriculture. Many Haitians argue that the project is necessary for economic self-sufficiency, particularly where food security remains a pressing issue. In 2021, as a result of the assassination of Haiti's President Moïse, the construction of the Canal ceased for more than two years. Yet, in 2023, the construction resumed, being 60% complete. However, Dominicans see the Canal as a breach of the treaty and an example of the lack of rule of law in Haiti, raising concerns about unregulated water extraction and potential environmental consequences. The historical significance of the Massacre River further deepens the symbolic weight of this conflict.

Therefore, a month after the resumption of the construction, the Dominican president, Luis Abinader, ordered for the border to be closed and militarised, elaborating in a press conference in 2023 that it causes economic strain and security risks, stating [translated by author]: "There will be no violence on this side, we are prepared to control it. There will be no violence here, you can be sure that if anything happens, it will be very isolated. But the Army, the Armed Forces, and the National Police are prepared... There will be no problem here." The DR acted fast – they immediately started the construction of the upstream Don Miguel Dam (costing roughly 46 million Dollars) to control downstream water supply and to pressure the Haitian government to halt their construction of the irrigation

Canal. The Dominican government also stopped granting visas to Haitians, and condemned those who supported the construction of the canal.

The Dominican government has ordered the border closure between the two nations, maintaining it until Haiti's internal conflict is resolved. The militarisation of the border in response to perceived security threats has only heightened tensions. With Haiti grappling with political instability and rampant gang violence, the DR's increased military presence is perceived both as a necessary protective measure and as an aggressive stance that risks further regional destabilisation. The geopolitical dimension of this crisis has been reinforced by the involvement of the United States. During a recent press availability, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio reaffirmed Washington's support for the DR's border security measures. While acknowledging the humanitarian crisis in Haiti, the U.S. has not condemned Abinader's policies, signaling a prioritisation of regional stability over human rights concerns. This tacit approval reflects broader U.S. interests in preventing further regional chaos and mass migration.

The implications for this border closure have severely disrupted trade and the daily lives of communities on both sides. Haiti is the DR's 2nd biggest trade partner, and Dominican farmers and Haitian merchants alike have felt the economic strain as cross-border commerce ground to a halt, exacerbating tensions that have simmered for decades. This crisis is not solely about economics; it is also deeply entwined with national identity and historical conflict. The DR has long sought to differentiate itself from Haiti, a stance reinforced by controversial legal decisions such as the 2013 ruling that effectively rendered many Dominicans of Haitian descent stateless. This measure, widely criticised both domestically and internationally, institutionalized discrimination and deepened social divides. Anti-Haitian rhetoric, often echoed in political discourse, has further fueled the volatile atmosphere and made prospects for reconciliation seem remote.

Since October 2024, Abinader has implemented harsh measures, including mass deportations that reportedly expel up to 10,000 undocumented Haitians every week. Human rights organisations and local activists have decried these actions as excessively punitive and racially discriminatory, leaving vulnerable populations, including long-term residents and children, in perilous situations.

As aforementioned, the situation at the Haiti-DR border is a convergence of historical animosity, economic hardship, and political posturing. As both nations confront these challenges, the crisis continues to undermine regional stability and complicate international efforts to promote human rights and economic development in the Caribbean. Moving forward, a balanced approach is required, where it can protect national interests while ensuring the humane treatment of Haitian asylum seekers and fostering sustainable bilateral relations. However, with a growing anti-Haitian sentiment in the DR, alongside the rise of right wing politics in the country,

the cycle of conflict and suffering will persist, with lasting repercussions for both Haiti and the DR.