Haiti in Crisis

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Last year, a long-delayed, Kenya-led, U.S.-funded coalition was approved by the UN Security Council and the interim Haitian government. The mission: to stabilize Haiti, currently in the throes of a complex gang war, using the support of 2,500 temporary police officers contributed by a handful of nations. As the international community looks forward to this challenge, it is important to consider how Haiti has arrived at this crisis point.

For many years, Haiti had been experiencing unrest due to rising energy prices, corruption, authoritarianism, gang violence, crushing poverty, and human rights abuses. On 7 July, 2021, Haiti's President, Jovenel Moïse, was assassinated by a group of foreign mercenaries. In the following year, actions by Moïse's unelected successor, the acting Prime Minister Ariel

Henry, sparked an open conflict which has mutated into a complex gang war concentrated mostly around the capital, Port-Au-Prince. This non-international armed conflict has also contributed towards the instability of the Caribbean, as well as presenting political problems for the United States and nations participating in the mission.

By January 2023, all of the country's parliamentarians left office, leaving the state mostly ungoverned by a central authority. Several thousand police officers, alongside several hundred armed forces personnel, struggled against disparate gangs/armies to maintain order in a nation of almost 12 million people. A number of these non-state armed groups broke into Haiti's largest prison in March 2024, releasing almost 4,000 prisoners, some of whom have been recruited into the gang forces.

Leading a loose coalition-of-convenience among the brutal gangs is the ex-policeman Jimmy Chérizier, better known by his nickname "Barbecue." This coalition, called "G9" for short, now commands roughly 80% of the capital territory, which contains over 3,000,000 residents in its expansive metro area. Displacing the alliance of gangsters would likely require prolonged urban warfare, since the G9 gangs—which wield automatic weapons and pilot UAVs—are unlikely to lay down their arms. Although there has officially been a UN arms embargo for 19 months, an "iron river" of materiel (mostly sourced from the United States) continues to enter, through secret jungle airstrips. Motivations for each of the gangs and fighters varies Barbecue claims to be waging a "social fight" against corruption, and allegedly has designs on political power.

In the years of struggle, human rights abuses and war crimes have escalated. Recruitment of child soldiers, kidnapping, sexual violence, mutilation, starvation of civilians, and more. A recent UN report claims that 580,000 people have been displaced, while other sources indicate that almost half the population is unable to secure food daily. The country's central port was taken over by G9 forces, and the country's healthcare infrastructure has collapsed.

On 12 April, 2024, a Transitional Presidential Council was established by CARICOM to lead Haiti out of the multifaceted disaster it has fallen into. Ideally, new elections will occur by 2026, at the latest. A new Prime Minister, Garry Conille (who had previously served as PM briefly in 2011-2012), has been appointed, though it remains to be seen how much influence he will wield inside Haiti. The logistics of the "Multinational Security Support Mission in Haiti" (MSS) are unclear, and issues remain regarding oversight, regional cooperation, and developing an inclusive peace process. Perhaps more problematic is devising a strategy to handle thousands of non-state fighters, who may find more solidarity between themselves in the face of a foreign intervention. Urban warfare is the most difficult, dynamic, and dangerous type of warfare, so this situation is likely to get much worse before it gets any better.