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Haiti journalist who survived gang hit returns to work I will not be silenced

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Haitian journalist Roberson Alphonse

Haiti has entered into a circle of violence that is spiraling out of control, and the international community seems unable to figure out a solution while the country's people continue to live in fear.

This is the view of journalist and news editor at Haitian newspaper *Le Nouvelliste*, Roberson Alphonse, himself a survivor of gang violence there.

Haiti's gangs have the capital Port-au-Prince under lockdown, with Prime Minister Ariel Henry unable to return home after a mission in Africa seeking help to fight back the gangs.

Speaking exclusively to *Guardian Media*, Alphonse explained that the gangs' power was nurtured for years by politicians, including late president Jovenel Moïse. This is why he said today, the gangs, led by Jimmy "Barbeque" Cherizier, are able to demand the prime minister step down under pain of unrest and genocide.

"While President Moïse was in office, the gangs were strengthened, and the gangs would be used by some to instill fear on opponents. According to few reports from human rights organisations, people in opposition against President Moïse used gangs too," Alphonse explained.

Last weekend, gangs stormed two major prisons near the capital, releasing 4,000 prisoners. Cherizier subsequently told Henry he must step down.

Henry was in Kenya then, signing a memorandum of understanding with President William Ruto for them to send 1,000 police officers to Haiti to join the Multinational Security Support Mission in Port-au-Prince. Henry is now effectively blocked from re-entering Haiti because of Cherizier's order.

Cherizier is head of an alliance of gangs called the G9 Family. A former police officer, he is so powerful that he is under UN sanctions for his crimes. He has not said why he wants Henry to demit office, but has had a history of engaging in political violence in support of the late Moïse.

CNN and other international agencies have reported that Henry was suspected to have been involved in the 2021 assassination of Moïse and is actively hampering the investigation. Henry has denied those claims.

Alphonse said Cherizier's motives are still not clear.

"I don't know if he wants to become the head of state, I don't know if he wants to have power through allies," he said.

"He wants prime minister Ariel Henry to resign in threat of civil war, and that's the situation."

Haiti has long been called a failed state and the Association of Caribbean Media Workers (ACM) recently criticised increasing attacks on journalists there. Alphonse is very familiar with such attacks. He no longer lives in Haiti, having survived an assassination attempt in 2022. At the time, he was news editor at *Le Novelliste*, Haiti's largest French-language daily, and head of news at radio station Majik9. As an investigative journalist, he reported on gangs and financial corruption and was investigating a massive financial scandal when he was attacked in October 2022.

Saying his work made him enemies, Alphonse noted, "I was on my way to work. I was ambushed by a pick-up and heavy gunmen. One of them had an M15 rifle and a shotgun. They attack me. I was wounded, I survived."

He was shot in both arms and underwent corrective surgery as recently as two weeks ago to remove bullet fragments still lodged there. He fled Haiti after the attack and was accepted into a fellowship which recently ended.

He continues to heal physically and emotionally from his ordeal. However, Alphonse has now returned to his jobs at *Le Nouvelliste* and *Majik9*, where he hosts a current affairs show.

“I have decided not to let anybody silence my voice. That’s why I decided to work again, to write again, to host my morning show and write again,” he said, noting the only difference is that he works from outside Haiti, as it is simply not safe to return.

Alphonse made it clear the real victims are the people who are being killed, raped and terrorised daily while the world scrambles to figure out a solution to the crisis.

The situation has prompted Caricom to intensify its efforts to broker a ceasefire or stability deal. Caricom leaders meet UN officials in Jamaica today to discuss how the crisis can be addressed.

On Friday, Guyana President Dr Irfaan Ali, the current Caricom chair, said the situation on the ground is dire and they are trying to impress upon Haitian stakeholders that time is running out.

Meanwhile, United States Marines sent in to reinforce security around the Haitian embassy, began evacuating non-essential staff over the weekend.

In a statement yesterday, the US State Department said the operation was carried out after nearby businesses were recently looted and stormed by armed gangs who now control over 80 per cent of Port-au-Prince.