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**Aid and Policy**

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## Haiti gangs: Who might intervene, and will it do more harm than good?

‘If Kenya leads the force, we will have issues.’



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The prospect of an international force being deployed to Haiti to try to quell rampant gang violence has been gaining steam, with Kenya sending a team to Port-au-Prince to assess leading a mission, while support builds from the United States, top UN officials, and Caribbean nations.

But opposition remains strong, with many Haitians fearful of outside interference that has proved damaging in the past, and some seeing it as more about propping up a corrupt elite than really doing something to end the violence and improve the desperate humanitarian situation.

As a Kenyan delegation visited Haiti last week to weigh the possibility of leading a UN-backed security force, many questions remained unanswered about what specific mandate it might have, which nations’ personnel might be involved, and how long it might be on the ground for.

Amid speculation that a draft UN resolution to authorize the mission is being drawn up, and one report claiming that the UN Security Council will vote on the matter as early as 15 September, this briefing aims to unpack how we got here, where the concerns lie, and what might follow.

### How did the idea of foreign intervention come about?

Gang violence has been a decades-long problem in Haiti but has surged since the July 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse. Some 150 to 200 gangs now control most of Port-au-Prince as well as key infrastructure and strategic roads around the capital.

This year, more than 2,400 people were killed and nearly 1,000 kidnapped between 1 January and 15 August alone, according to the UN. Women and girls are repeatedly raped. The violence, which has now displaced more than 200,000 people, continues to expand out from the capital.

Haiti's de facto prime minister, Ariel Henry, first called for an armed foreign intervention last October. The United States supported that push, saying it wanted to restore security so that fresh elections could be held. However, Washington made it clear it was unwilling to lead the mission itself, wary perhaps of how many Haitians distrust it and former colonial ruler France for decades of meddling and propping up past abusive governments.

This didn't stop the United States becoming busy behind the scenes trying – albeit unsuccessfully – to persuade others like Canada and Brazil to step up. Despite strong support from UN chief António Guterres, who has been calling for the deployment of a “rapid action force” to restore law and order and disarm the gangs, the international debate then seemed to stall.

That was until the beginning of August, when Kenya suddenly became the first country to officially volunteer, committing to deploy 1,000 police officers to help fight the gangs and suggesting it might lead the mission. Jamaica and the Bahamas soon offered personnel too.

### **What do critics say?**

Opposition has centered around two key questions. Is Haiti ready for another foreign intervention so soon after the UN's “stabilization” mission, known as MINUSTAH, left under such a heavy cloud in 2017? And, even if it is, is Kenya really the right country to lead it?

Long marred by allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation, and of violence against civilians, MINUSTAH's 13-year deployment was terminally tarnished when Nepalese blue helmets were blamed for bringing cholera into the Caribbean nation and setting of an epidemic that claimed more than 10,000 lives in the aftermath of the calamitous January 2010 earthquake.

And in an open letter sent last week to the UN Security Council, Renzo Pomi, Amnesty International's representative at the UN, pointed out that his organization had “recently condemned” Kenyan police for their “continued unlawful use of force against protesters”, and asked for the human rights history of any force to be thoroughly reviewed before deployment.

Language and cultural barriers are another potential problem, with many people questioning how effective a Kenyan-led force can be if it can't communicate in French, let alone *Kreyol*.

“The Kenyan police have been involved in human rights violations and they don't speak *Kreyol* nor French,” Pierre Espérance, executive director of the National Human Rights Defense Network in Haiti (RNDDH), told *The New Humanitarian*. “I'm not saying Kenya can't be part of a team, but if it leads the force, we will have issues.”

Jean Jonassaint, a Syracuse University professor and expert on Haiti, said religion can also come into play. While part of the Kenyan population is Muslim, many Haitians practice *Vodou*.

“I can foresee the cultural clashes there will be,” he told *The New Humanitarian*. “Also because countries that were French colonies and former English colonies have different worldviews.”

But the UN's independent expert on human rights for Haiti, William O'Neill, who has pushed for a foreign intervention, didn't share many of these concerns.

O'Neill, who helped establish the Haitian National Police (PNH) in the mid-90s, said many senior police officers speak English, and suggested that the PNH should handle any negotiations with the gangs.

To be successful, he cautioned, the mission must include specialized teams and count on vetted officers with clean records who are skilled in intelligence and hostage rescuing.

"I'm much more concerned about the quality of these people, and how they will try to minimize any civilian casualties in a densely populated area," he told *The New Humanitarian*.

### **What mandate might it have?**

The visit of Kenya's 10-member security assessment team, which held meetings 21-22 August in Port-au-Prince with government officials, the PNH, and diplomats from different countries, did little to clear up worries and uncertainty over what any international force might actually do.

"There is a lot of unknown about what will be the modus operandi, the rules of engagement, how it will work," Johan Lefebvre Chevallier, Mercy Corps' country director in Haiti, told *The New Humanitarian*.

According to the *Miami Herald*, the mission could end up looking more like a "static protection force". Rather than conducting offensive police or military operations to take on the gangs, this, the report suggested, would involve stationary forces being deployed to protect key infrastructure: airports, sea ports, and main roads.

US officials have repeatedly suggested that the deployment of a non-UN multinational force, which is what is apparently being proposed, could give the overwhelmed Haitian police force greater leeway to tackle the gangs by protecting critical infrastructure.

Haitian newspaper *Le Nouvelliste*, however, reported that after his visit to Haiti, Ambassador George Orina, head of the Kenyan delegation, was "convinced that Haiti needs an operational offensive force to solve the issue of armed gangs". So far, nothing has been confirmed.

"[The force] will not be there to replace the National Police or to carry out its work, but it will come to help it become more efficient, more adapted, better capable of fulfilling its mission to protect and serve," read a statement from Haiti's Ministry of Communication.

Although records show more than 14,000 Haitian police, only 3,300 are on public safety duty, according to the UN. Many police stations have been abandoned after being torched and looted by gangs. Dozens of police officers have also been violently killed or kidnapped by gang members, while more than 3,000 have left the force since 2021.

In a sign of the increasing powerlessness of the Haitian police, and of the collapse of the state, vigilante groups have risen up to try to bring a stop to the endless killings, kidnappings, rapes in their neighborhoods – a movement known as *Bwa Kale* (peeled wood) in *Kreyol*.

Events on Saturday 26 August provided a stark reminder of the scale of the challenge facing the Haitian police and any international deployment: A local pastor led a march of parishioners armed with sticks, pikes, and machetes to evict gang members from Canaan – a makeshift town created to house survivors of the January 2010 earthquake on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince. The gangs opened fire, killing a reported 20 people, and taking more hostage.

## **What do Haitians themselves want?**

The Haitian citizens *The New Humanitarian* spoke to have mixed feelings.

“We are an independent country, so we should be able to change our [own] situation, but since President Moïse was killed we are being left to fend for ourselves,” said a young doctor who preferred not to give her name for security reasons.

She recalled a litany of gang-related incidents from the past two years: the health centre she worked in closed because of the violence; she and her family were kidnapped; she was robbed in her home; she had to spend months living with relatives because she was being threatened.

“Now, we don’t see the end of the tunnel,” she said. “So, if a force can help us, it is welcome.”

There is little official data about the level of support among Haitians for a foreign intervention.

A survey published last February showed that 69% of nearly 1,330 people across Haiti were in favor, but members of the Montana Accord, an influential Haitian opposition movement, have questioned its methodology while arguing for a homegrown Haitian solution instead.

Residents of Port-au-Prince told *The New Humanitarian* the general feeling in the capital is that very few would reject the deployment of an international force, given how bad things now are.

“The feedback we have is that Haitians believe the solution should be Haitian-led but know that now there is a security vacuum,” said Lefebvre Chevallier of Mercy Corps.

P. J., a Haitian humanitarian worker who asked to speak anonymously for safety reasons, said the population is tired of experiencing the impacts of violence in all aspects of daily life and needs a foreign intervention.

“I speak for most Haitians: We are fed up. The situation is exhausting, terrifying, unacceptable,” he told *The New Humanitarian*. “We don’t have a choice.”

## **What would it mean for humanitarian aid?**

In the past month, the country has registered an unprecedented surge in violence. The number of internally displaced people – and the death toll – keep rising.

On 22 August, *Le Nouvelliste* reported that main routes linking the capital to *Cap-Haitien* are in the grip of gangs that “kill, rape, and kidnap all day on large stretches of the road”, adding that the central department of Artibonite is now divided in two, and crossing from one side to the other is extremely risky.

While unmet humanitarian needs increase – more than half of Haiti’s 11 million population now regularly experience hunger – NGOs worry that if an international force works out badly it could make aid operations even harder and reduce their already limited access to affected people.

“It will largely depend on how the gangs respond,” said Lefebvre Chevallier. “So we are looking at the different operational modalities in case it goes one way or the other.”

Ricardo Germain, a Haitian security specialist, said any difference in the humanitarian outcomes would depend on how any mission is deployed.

“If the strategy adopted is to secure [key] access points to make [aid] access easier, there will be some clashes with criminal armed groups,” he told *The New Humanitarian*. “The other possibility is for militaries to offer air transport for humanitarian aid, which requires a huge budget for the mission and for humanitarians.”

O’Neill said one of the most pressing challenges for any force would be to quickly link up with humanitarian agencies and organizations on the ground to help coordinate the aid effort, but aid officials were unsure how that might work.

“We don’t know what the interaction of the UN with our NGO will be, if there will be civil-military mechanisms to avoid NGOs to be in the middle of the potential intervention,” said Lefebvre Chevallier.

“We are concerned,” said Allassane Drabo, country director for *Plan International* in Haiti. “Should this become a reality, it’s absolutely imperative that there are also mechanisms to ensure that all parties adhere to international humanitarian law, humanitarian impartiality, neutrality, and independence.”

### **What else?**

Amid these lingering uncertainties over any international force, there is broad agreement that any deployment would only be a “cosmetic solution” if isn’t coupled with greater efforts to reinforce Haitian institutions and reduce the power of the gangs by other measures.

“It must be a package,” said Espérance, from the Haitian human rights network. “Foreigners should help us have political negotiations that lead to an agreement that takes into consideration governance, the state of rights, the fight against impunity, corruption, and insecurity. A force focused on security alone will not do it.”

Better youth and employment policies must also be developed, said Germain, the security expert, explaining how it is the lack of jobs and extreme poverty that force young people to join the gangs.

With strengthening institutions in mind, the regional CARICOM body is reportedly sending a delegation to Haiti before 15 September to try to reach a political agreement between rival Haitian parties ahead of any foreign intervention.

Espérance underlined that deploying foreign personnel without first solving Haiti’s deeper structural and governance issues would only make matters worse.

“We are not against the support of an international force, because the Haitian police need assistance,” he said. “But how can a force come to make the country safer if the authorities are colluding with gangs? [In these circumstances], the force will only come to violate human rights and reinforce the gangs.”

Edited by Andrew Gully.