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# Haiti's Window of Opportunity

What It Will Take to Stop Gang Violence and Promote Stability

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Running past a burning barricade in Port-au-Prince, August 2024

In late July, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield visited Haiti and sounded an upbeat note. “I do have a sense of hope,” she said at a press conference, citing the “many people here on the ground” who were “working every day to create a better future for the Haitian people.” She was referring, in part, to the roughly 400 Kenyan police officers who have arrived in Port-au-Prince as part of an international peacekeeping force that is eventually projected to number 2,500. The hope is that this UN Security Council–approved mission—formally referred to as the Multinational Security Support mission (MSS)—will allow Haiti to assert control over the country’s gangs, which have established de facto control over much of the capital’s

neighborhoods and plunged the country into a dramatic humanitarian crisis. “This mission has opened a door to progress,” Thomas-Greenfield said.

Haiti could certainly use more progress. Since even before President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated in July 2021, the country has been suffering from intense violence. In the past three years, around 12,000 people have been killed, and some 600,000 have been displaced across the country. Gangs have established control or influence over around 80 percent of Port-au-Prince and have been spreading their presence to other regions.

Thomas-Greenfield is right that, even amid all the chaos, there are reasons to be hopeful. The international police reinforcements have started to deploy. There is also change within Haiti’s government. After almost three years of deep political instability under the leadership of acting Prime Minister Ariel Henry—seen by many Haitians as the prolongation of a corrupt system—Haiti now has a cross-party transitional presidential council, a new prime minister, and a full cabinet. These steps toward more inclusive political leadership, combined with the first deployments of the MSS, have created a path toward stability.

But the country still faces enormous challenges. Persistent gang violence, an understaffed and underequipped international mission, domestic political infighting, and corruption could destroy this path toward a better future. To prevent a setback and allow for some semblance of normalcy to return to Haiti, transitional officials must create a more permanent and stable governing arrangement. They need to quickly address corruption accusations. Haiti’s foreign allies, meanwhile, must step up their financial contributions to the MSS to give it a real chance against the gangs. The Haitian government could also consider creating ways for minors currently involved with organized crime to exit. And eventually, the country could consider negotiations that would help facilitate the gangs’ permanent demobilization.

## **A FRAGILE STANDOFF**

February 2024 marked a turning point for Haiti. Henry, who had proved unable to mitigate growing gang violence, left the country on official business. Sensing an opening, the gangs shifted their strategy: rather than continuing to battle each other for territorial control, they started coordinating attacks against the state in what became known as the Viv Ansanm coalition. As part of this unprecedented offensive, gangs assaulted and burned dozens of police stations, the capital’s main seaports, and its airport, which closed for nearly three months. They also attacked Haiti’s two largest prisons, allowing nearly half the country’s prison population to escape.

With Port-au-Prince under siege, leaders from Caribbean countries—together with Canada, France, the United States, and others—convened an emergency meeting in Jamaica. The group aimed to establish a consensus government in Haiti that would

include all major political and social groups, leaving no powerful outsiders that might sabotage the process. The result was a transitional presidential council. Its representatives were chosen by six prominent political groups and participants from Haiti's private sector and civil society organizations. The council, in turn, selected a new prime minister after Henry resigned under international pressure. Its choice—Garry Conille—is a technocrat with a long history of public service in Haiti and with the UN. He was also the candidate favored by Washington.

Since Conille took office and the first deployments of international police officers landed in Haiti, the gangs operating in the capital have mostly retreated to their strongholds, where they have built barricades and trenches. This has allowed economic activity to gradually return to parts of Port-au-Prince that had been disrupted by the gangs' concerted offensive. Improvised markets have taken over busy streets, and buses have established new routes (the violence having forced them out of their old ones).

But the fighting has hardly ended. In Port-au-Prince, the MSS has limited its activities to patrolling certain sectors of the capital. The gangs have thus decided to consolidate their control of the metropolitan area. Gangs operating in the outskirts of Port-au-Prince recently launched attacks in the towns of Gressier and Ganthier—previously largely free of violence—and have tried to establish their dominance over the towns of Cabaret and Arcahaie. Criminal outfits also attacked a convoy transporting Conille in July after he visited a hospital that state forces had recaptured from these groups.

Haitians are growing impatient, and they hope that the MSS can steadily deal more damage to these groups, in part by penetrating gang strongholds. But less than 20 percent of the Kenyan-led mission's personnel is currently on the ground, giving it limited power to disrupt the organizations. Sources close to the gangs told the International Crisis Group that as long as the mission's footprint does not increase dramatically, the gangs assume that MSS forces will be limited to protecting infrastructure, and they are thus not too worried about the mission weakening their hold over the capital.

In this environment, Haitians fear that the world has once again made promises it will not fulfill. Brian Nichols, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere, has said that existing international funds can cover the costs of 600 or so officers, including those currently on the ground, plus the 200 police officers from neighboring Caribbean countries who have received training but are still waiting to be deployed. With a lack of ready money stalling new arrivals, countries will have to invest much more than the roughly \$380 million they already have to reach the 2,500-troop target.

## **BEYOND SECURITY**

Without better security, Haiti will struggle to see improvements in public well-being. Yet a strategy solely centered on security will not be enough. Efforts by the police and the MSS will bear fruit only if they are supported by a functional and effective government. And although the new transitional government has provided a certain level of stability, there are signs that the country's politics are starting to break down again.

Three months after his appointment, tensions between Conille, the members of the council, and the parties that elected them have been growing. At the core is a competition for power: although the president is constitutionally the head of state, in the current arrangement Conille effectively has executive powers, and the council alleges that he has overstepped his authority. (They are unhappy, for example, that he has represented the government in foreign official visits.) People close to the transition government have told the Crisis Group that members of the council have privately threatened the prime minister with conducting an evaluation of his performance, one that could lead to his dismissal.

Conflicts have also surfaced between the groups that were selected to form the presidential council and those they appointed to the body. Two major groups, including the Montana Accord, a broad coalition of political and civil society groups that early on had put forward a governance plan for Haiti, have distanced themselves from their representatives on the council after claiming that they have been kept out of important decision-making. These tensions could erode the political unity that the transitional government was meant to foster. The tensions could, relatedly, give rise to a political opposition that might capitalize on any chance to undermine and discredit the government.

And then there is corruption. The head of the National Credit Bank has accused three members of the presidential council of demanding hefty bribes or lose his position. These allegations evoke previous scandals, including ones that enveloped the previous president, Moïse, and his predecessor, Michel Martelly. The charges have enraged Haitians and threatened the stability achieved in the last few months. Part of the new government's transition plan is to establish a specialized financial prosecuting authority to investigate corruption, which has depleted public finances in the past. Support for the authority from the UN and other multilateral bodies will be important to making sure that this initiative is effective.

But fully dealing with Haiti's governance problems will eventually require moving beyond the transitional system of government. The UN-approved mandate calls for the MSS to help the Haitian police "build security conditions conducive to holding free and fair elections." The agreement signed by the transitional government states that elections must take place in time for a new government to take office in February 2026. Yet without a stronger presence from the mission and decisive action against the gangs, it is unlikely that the country will be prepared to vote by then. And rushed elections could do more harm than good.

The risks will be particularly high if gangs continue to control much of the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area, where approximately a quarter of the country's total population lives. In this case, political parties might—as they have in the past—try to forge alliances with gangs to get more votes. Even more perturbing is the possibility that the gangs, which have grown more independent from their past elite sponsors, could put forward their own candidates. “The armed groups will play the game,” one humanitarian worker, who knows gang leaders, told us. “They are pulling back into their fiefdoms and hope to engage in negotiations with political groups in preparation for the elections.” There is no way to completely prevent the gangs from being involved in Haiti's next contest, but minimizing their influence will be essential to curbing the long-standing use of violence between the country's political factions.

## **EXIT RAMPS**

Soon after the transitional government was established, Jimmy Chérizier, the de facto spokesperson of the Viv Ansanm coalition, proposed that the government and the gangs sit down to talk. “We need dialogue today, Mr. Prime Minister. Prove to the world that you can make history as someone who . . . pacifies the country,” Chérizier (who is better known as “Barbecue”) said in an online video. Conille responded by saying that the bandits must “lay down their guns and recognize the authority of the state before any other arrangements.”

Conille's declaration stood in stark contrast with previous bellicose statements about the need to subdue the bandits by force. As a result, many Haitians believed that the prime minister's statement opened the door to negotiations. At this stage, the vast majority of Haitians oppose any kind of talks with the gangs, especially if it includes the prospect of some sort of amnesty. Opponents argue that negotiations would effectively forgive the gangs for the harm they caused and would not respond to the needs of the victims of criminal violence. These opponents also believe that the gangs have not given any reason to believe that they would stand by their word.

But there are strong reasons to doubt that the gangs can be dissolved by force alone. Most gangs are entrenched in densely populated areas where houses are separated by hundreds of narrow alleys, making it nearly impossible for the police to fight gang members without harming civilians. The gangs still have strong links to political and business elites who could throw them lifelines at crucial moments. Gang co-optation at all levels of the Haitian National Police will make it difficult to avoid leaks about planned operations. And neither the police force nor the international security mission is currently equipped to take territory away from gang control and replace it with a permanent state presence in these areas. The last UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti failed to defeat the gangs for similar reasons; instead, it merely prompted gangs to lay low until UN forces withdrew, at which point they returned stronger than before. Haitians should therefore start exploring when and under what conditions they could contemplate talking with the criminal groups, with the goal of permanently dismantling them.

One place to start could be with children. Between 30 and 50 percent of the gangs' rank and file (around 5,000 members and collaborators) are minors, according to UNICEF. Most of them joined out of desperation. In a country where hundreds of thousands of children have no money or incentive to go to school, and where legal livelihoods are scarce, joining criminal groups can be the only way to secure regular weekly payments. Creating off-ramps for minors could help convince Haitians that discreet negotiations are a necessary step toward achieving peace, and not a political quid pro quo that disregards the public interest. For this, the Haitian government should reactivate the currently dormant National Commission for Disarmament, Dismantlement, and Reintegration.

That would be a first step; Haiti will need many more to return to normalcy. But with the creation of a transitional government and the arrival of the first mission deployments, there is finally a small window of opportunity for Haiti to curb violence and start rebuilding its state. The path is not straightforward, and progress will hinge on a virtuous interplay between the MSS's campaign against gangs and the transitional government's restoration of public confidence. But Haiti now has a shot at a better future.

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