



# GNSI DECISION BRIEF

## Beyond Intervention: Sustainable Solutions for Haiti's Security Needs

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### Current Political Climate in Haiti

Events are rapidly evolving in Haiti with each week bringing a new crisis and leading some to say the country is at risk of state failure. Haiti held its last presidential election in 2016 and its parliament last voted in 2019.<sup>1</sup> At the start of this year, the remaining democratically elected government officials formally vacated their positions as their terms ended.<sup>2</sup> After President Jovenel Moïse's assassination in 2021 and the resignation of the unelected and unpopular de facto prime minister Ariel Henry, Fritz Bélizaire was chosen as the new prime minister by a transitional council at the end of April—meaning the Haitian populace has had no part in selecting its current government.

With doubts concerning the state's credibility and the legitimacy of its leaders, there are estimates of over 200 gangs vying for territory and power within Haiti. Some gangs are hoping to set up their own governing council to rule the country<sup>3</sup> and have signaled they will not recognize the appointed coalition established by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) international partners.<sup>4</sup>

In recent months, armed gangs united to carry out coordinated attacks on ports, airports, and government buildings. In early March, gangs stormed two of Haiti's largest prisons, releasing thousands of prisoners and sending the country into a state of emergency. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that 1,436 non-violent actors were killed between January and March 2024<sup>5</sup> and this surge of violence led to over 360,000 displaced people nationwide.<sup>6</sup> Now 4.35 million people, nearly half the population, are facing food insecurity, and 1.4 million are facing emergency levels of hunger.<sup>7</sup>

In early May, the Biden administration approved a 60-million-dollar military aid package attempting to curb some of the gang violence by equipping the Haitian National Police with weapons and equipment.

### Past Interferences and Interventions

For the past two decades, Haiti has been depicted as one of the world's most volatile and fragile states. Previous international interventions and interferences have hindered Haiti's ability to operate independently.

#### *Colonial occupation: 1915-1934 U.S. military rule*

In 1915 when the seventh Haitian president in four years was assassinated, President Woodrow Wilson sent the U.S. Marines to invade Haiti and secure funds for City Bank and other American banks that had financed Haiti's debt repayments. This resulted in the removal of \$500,000 from the Haitian National Bank.<sup>8</sup> The invasion formally ended with the Haitian-American Treaty of 1915. The U.S. occupation lasted until 1934 when U.S. military forces left, meanwhile the U.S. government "continued to control

Haiti's public finances until 1947, siphoning away around 40% of Haiti's national income to service debt repayments." The military occupation and continued economic interventions benefited foreign banks and companies, and a few elite Haitians, while most of the country remained in poverty.

#### *United Nations and Haiti*

Various United Nations (UN) missions have been implemented in the hope that elections would help solve political upheaval.<sup>9</sup> Three years following the coup of democratically elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1994, the U.S., acting with the authorization of the UN, sent a military force to place President Aristide back into power. Mass protests forced President Aristide to flee once again in 2004, leading to another U.S. intervention, which was later replaced by the newly established United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH).<sup>10</sup> MINUSTAH was responsible for relief efforts during the 2010 earthquake, and the subsequent cholera outbreak that killed 12,000 Haitians.<sup>11</sup> This cycle of intervention has helped produce a fragile nation dependent on foreign intervention which then forms a "substantial part of its domestic policy and this executive-led process therefore violates the [Haitian] people's right to political participation," and has so far failed to establish a stable and long-term functioning government.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Establishing a credible rule of law**

After MINUSTAH departed from Haiti in 2017, a smaller peacekeeping mission was suggested, meant to support government efforts to strengthen the Haitian National Police (HNP), putting the security efforts back in the hands of the country.<sup>13</sup> Haiti maintains a police force of approximately 9,000 officers on active duty daily, serving a population of 11 million. This figure falls roughly one-third short of the United Nations' recommended force size for a country of comparable magnitude.<sup>14</sup>

Support to Haiti's police force was assured in October 2023 when the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2699 was approved, allowing for a Kenyan-led international police mission to address the critical situation in Haiti. Resolution 2699, also known as the Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission,<sup>15</sup> will have executive policing authority to combat the gangs and enable secure democratic elections. However, if the underlying problems that lead to Haiti's instability are not addressed, any stability may be short-lived. This means that despite international support, the Haitian police may not be able to sustain efforts long-term and maintain a competent workforce without additional structural change.

If foreign governments are committed to assisting Haiti, they need to support Haitian civil society in re-establishing democratic norms and economic security for the entire population. Previous

security interventions have contributed to eroding democracy, a legacy of gang violence, and the practice of political power using armed militias to exercise authority. With no democratically elected officials currently holding office, and the newly appointed transitional council still trying to stop the violence and avert a crisis, a priority needs to be made for selecting leaders not credibly accused of corruption or linked to support of criminal groups.

The failure to hold elections after the assassination of Moïse, while keeping an appointed, un-elected prime minister in office, further harmed the government's credibility and risks a democratic regression. These issues are compounded by Haiti's current economic prospects which add to the climate of social unrest.

### Economic Security

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and its citizens have little opportunity for social advancement. "Consider that 80 percent of the population remains in poverty and youth unemployment has remained at 30 percent or higher since 2004."<sup>16</sup> Any future intervention not only has to reestablish the rule of law but also help change the economic prospects of all Haitians.

A historical factor that influenced Haiti's economic stability was its debt repayment to France. In 1825, King Charles X of France sent an armed flotilla to Port-au-Prince, demanding 150 million francs from the Haitian government as a punitive repayment to former French slaveholders who were overthrown and exiled during the Haitian revolution. The Haitian government took out loans from French banks which took 122 years to pay off. In return for the debt repayment, France would recognize Haiti as a nation. Debt payments and the astronomically high interest rates

for the next century accounted for nearly 80% of the Haitian national debt.<sup>17</sup> This led to the Haitian economy to focus on cash crops and other items that could sell quickly instead of investing in long-term economic solutions.

Now much of Haiti's economy is dependent on trade between the Dominican Republic and the United States. The Haiti Economic Lift Program Extension (HELP) Act was established after the earthquake in 2010 to broaden the items eligible for duty-free status<sup>18</sup> This act was extended in 2023 so trade preferences are now extended through 2035.<sup>19</sup> The US International Trade Commission (USITC) released an investigation report examining the impact of US preferences on Haiti's economy and trade and found that US programs helped develop the Haitian apparel sector, which is Haiti's largest export.<sup>20</sup> Evidence shows that trade preferences for Haiti do have an impact, but without reliable infrastructure allowing Haiti to prosper, the economic and social advancements for the country cannot reach their full potential.

### Conclusion

Previous UN security interventions focused mainly on security and policing gangs, but failed to address the historical political and economic faults that would give the country a stable footing to move forward. Internationally led security interventions have not and will not solve the inherent destabilization of Haitian democracy unless a comprehensive approach is implemented. Additionally, the UN-led response to the 2010 earthquake, along with the mismanagement of funds, and lack of accountability of peacekeepers have led to a deep mistrust of the UN. Any future interventions or assistance should focus on Haitian sovereignty, democracy and human rights while avoiding approaches that reinforce the existing power-structures and are comprised of local and international decision-makers.

## Decision Points

- **Elections are not the panacea for establishing a stable and functional democracy in Haiti, but the initial step in a long process. Keeping that in mind, how can Haitian civil society be systematically engaged in the governance process to ensure trust and long-lasting stability?**
- **Should affluent nations consider accepting more Haitian refugees and asylum seekers? According to the World Bank, Haitian expatriates sent \$3 billion in remittances back home to Haiti in 2018, which was almost one-third of the island nation's entire GDP."<sup>21</sup>**
- **In what ways can future intervention efforts address the current underlying problems within the HNP while effectively contributing to the long-lasting reconstruction and strengthening of Haiti's strained justice system?**
- **What are possible strategies to reestablish accountability for pervasive human rights abuses committed by criminal groups currently operating within Haiti?**

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