



Haiti's Gangs: Can a Foreign Mission Break Their Stranglehold?

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What's new? Foreign security personnel are expected to begin arriving in Haiti in early 2024 to assist the national police in fighting the gangs besieging much of the country. UN-authorized, Kenyan-led and designed with U.S. support, this multinational mission aims to restore security and enable long overdue elections.

Why does it matter? Haiti's wave of violence and political breakdown have deepened the country's humanitarian emergency. With police outnumbered and outgunned by criminal groups, foreign assistance is needed. But the mission must overcome daunting operational and political challenges for it to be effective.

What should be done? The mission should not deploy in force until it has sufficient troops, training and equipment to overpower the gangs. It should prepare for urban combat, and develop community-level sources of intelligence, to help minimize civilian harm. A political settlement and major reforms will be required for gains to endure.

I. Overview

Answering a plea for assistance from the Haitian government, the UN Security Council has authorized a multinational force to help it break criminal gangs' grip on much of the country. Despite the chequered legacy of past interventions, most Haitians believe only foreign forces can bring respite from the violence that has upended their lives. The proposed mission may encounter several obstacles, however. While Kenya has volunteered troops, judicial proceedings could hold up deployment. The mission will also face big operational challenges, such as shifting gang allegiances that create the possibility of a united front against it; the difficulties of protecting civilians in urban warfare; and corruption among police and politicians linked to criminal groups. A small team of Kenyans arriving in early 2024 can help commanders understand the terrain and ensure they do not deploy before they are set up to prevail. In the long term, a political settlement and a robust demobilisation program, as well as plans for staunching weapons flows and severing ties between criminals and Haitian elites, are needed to sustain progress.

Already besieged by gangs, which had been tightening their control of areas throughout the country for years, Haiti suffered a further blow with the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in 2021. More than 200,000 Haitians are now displaced, as gangs

seize neighbourhoods, thoroughfares and fuel depots – choking off supplies of food and other essentials to people in need. As it endures the humanitarian and security crisis the gangs have engendered, the country is also in political limbo. There have been no elections since 2016, and the acting prime minister, Ariel Henry, who was appointed to his post and is seen as illegitimate by much of the political opposition, has shown reluctance to share power. He has committed to step down in February after elections that were supposed to have taken place in 2023, but it remains to be seen whether he will stick to his pledge since there were no polls.

Against this backdrop, the opposition worries that the arrival of an international force to help restore security and address Haiti's humanitarian crisis – which Henry requested in 2022 and the UN Security Council authorised in October 2023 – could help the current government cling to power. Ideally, as Crisis Group has previously recommended, the country's political forces would come together in welcoming the mission. But today's dynamics suggest that the bigger risk to the country's long-suffering citizenry would be to delay the deployment yet further. So long as legal, operational and other requirements can be met, it is safer for Haitians menaced by gang rule to move forward under sub-optimal political conditions.

Still, those requirements are no small hurdle to clear. Even getting to this point has been challenging. Approved by the UN Security Council almost a year after Henry's government first made its request, the international mission began forming only after Kenya volunteered to lead it with a contribution of 1,000 police officers. The difficulty in identifying a lead country and other troop contributors, despite U.S. entreaties, underscores just how wary governments are of becoming involved in Haiti, where foreign interventions (including the last UN peacekeeping mission to the country, which left in 2017) have left a sometimes tragic legacy. As envisioned, the new mission, which will be organised as an ad hoc coalition rather than a blue-helmeted UN operation, will seek to protect state institutions as well as critical infrastructure and transport hubs, and together with the Haitian police, launch a counter-offensive against gangs. It appears that an advance contingent of several hundred officers will deploy ahead of the rest of the force. It should arrive in Haiti in early 2024.

Major challenges lie in wait for the mission once it is on the ground. Haiti's gangs could ally to battle it together. Fighting in Haiti's ramshackle urban neighbourhoods will put innocent civilians at risk. Links between corrupt police and the gangs could make it difficult to maintain operational secrecy. For all these reasons, preparation will be of critical importance. Discussions are now under way between Kenyan and Haitian security forces about the mission's goals and rules of engagement. The projected advance contingent should continue work already begun by assessment missions that have visited from Nairobi. It should map the zones of gang control, assess the threat they pose and measure operational risks, with the aim of ensuring that when the full mission deploys it can make a convincing show of force that does not provoke the gangs or spark violent retaliation. Local experts emphasised to Crisis Group that a strong early showing in this spirit could help persuade the gangs to move to a non-confrontational posture.

Other key tasks for the mission will be to absorb expertise on civilian protection in urban settings, develop intelligence networks in the communities where it will be operating, train vetted police units with whom it can cooperate and begin devising a demobilisation program so that gang members who wish to leave their criminal outfits

have a pathway out. Of utmost importance will be scrupulous attention to the safeguards built into the UN mandate to prevent the misdeeds of MINUSTAH, the last UN peacekeeping mission, which became notorious for spreading cholera throughout the country as well as engaging in sexual exploitation of local women.

Finally, both the mission and its supporters will need to turn their attention to structural issues if there is to be hope of an end to Haiti's overlapping crises. A political settlement is at the top of the list. At present, to the population's outrage, Haitian politicians are squabbling over formation of a transitional government as gangs continue their campaign of violence. Multiple rounds of negotiation between Henry and the opposition have failed to produce a stable and authentically cross-party pact. After Haiti's international partners upped pressure on Henry to make additional concessions in the quest for a power-sharing agreement, opposition groups fastened on what they saw as a sign of weakness: they are now calling upon him to make good on his promise to resign by February. Outside actors with influence will need to continue pushing the two sides to agree on the shape of a transitional government that can begin a process of institutional renewal and prepare the country for the first elections in years.

The multinational mission's deployment in Haiti could bring essential relief to a country mired in strife. But bumps in the road ahead pose a major threat to the force's effectiveness. After decades of international interventions and billions in aid, Haiti fatigue in foreign capitals is real. But rarely has the country needed help more than now. For the sake of Haiti's long-suffering people, every effort must go into helping the mission succeed.

II. A Fraught Security and Political Landscape

Haiti has suffered gang violence for years, but the power of these groups has soared since the assassination of President Moïse and appointment of acting Prime Minister Henry.¹ There are currently some 300 gangs in Haiti, controlling most of the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area and key parts of the Artibonite valley, the area north of the capital where much of the country's food is grown.²

A. A Surge in Violence amid a Breakdown in Authority

Violence perpetrated by gangs – including murder, rape, kidnapping and extortion – has spread across much of the country in recent years, becoming far more intense. The UN reported almost 4,000 people killed and 3,000 kidnapped in gang-related violence in 2023 alone.³ Sexual violence was also widespread, with over 1,100 reported

¹ Henry has been acting prime minister since July 2021, soon after Moïse's killing, when he received the blessing of foreign powers – notably members of the Core Group, an informal body made up of representatives from the UN and the Organization of American States, as well as ambassadors from the U.S., Canada, France, Brazil, Germany, Spain and the European Union – to form a government. See Crisis Group Latin America & Caribbean Briefing N°48, *Haiti's Last Resort: Gangs and the Prospect of Foreign Intervention*, 14 December 2022.

² "Humanitarian Response Plan 2023", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, (OCHA), April 2023.

³ "Visible signs of hope' for Haiti, Assembly president Francis insists", UN News, 18 December 2023.

attacks on women as of October.⁴ As part of ten massacres perpetrated by gangs in greater Port-au-Prince since 2018, at least 179 women and girls were raped.⁵

There are roughly 200,000 internally displaced persons in Haiti – largely comprising people who have left their homes in the face of gang attacks – including 40,000 who had to flee violence between August and October 2023.⁶ Many have sought refuge at makeshift sites in public squares or schools, in the latter case taking a large number of classrooms out of use for education.⁷ The gangs also impose their own taxes on businesses from informal street vendors to industrial parks in areas they control. The result is shortages of essential goods and rising food prices in a country where almost half the population does not have enough to eat.⁸ Kidnapping for ransom, affecting rich and poor alike, has forced thousands of families to sacrifice their savings or fall into debt to secure the release of their loved ones.⁹

Gangs have run rampant because the state has largely crumbled. As discussed further below, Henry has little public support, and it is widely held that only backing from Haiti's foreign partners keeps him in power.¹⁰ There has been no election of any sort since 2016, and parliament has not held a session since January 2020, when the terms of all the deputies in the lower house and almost all the senators expired. The country's remaining elected officials – a rump bloc of ten senators – saw their terms run out in January 2023. At the same time, the judicial system is beset by long strikes by staff and extreme insecurity, which has forced officials to abandon several courthouses in the capital that have fallen into gangs' hands. The state's provision of basic services is likewise exiguous, with huge shortfalls in potable water, electricity and waste collection. Rivers of garbage traverse many areas of Port-au-Prince, producing illness and misery.¹¹

The Haitian National Police are weak, too, unable to staunch gang violence despite support from the UN political mission in Haiti, known as BINUH, and countries such as Canada, the U.S. and France. The force has fewer than 10,000 active officers to cover the national territory. (According to the UN-recommended ratio,

⁴ “Droits des femmes, des filles et des minorités sexuelles en Haïti : rapport sur les violences enregistrées de janvier à octobre 2023”, Nègès Mawon, November 2023.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Increased Violence in the Capital Drives Tens of Thousands of Haitians from Their Homes, Leaving Them Reliant on Food Aid”, World Food Programme, 30 October 2023.

⁷ “Displaced Haitians Face Greater Risks in Improvised Sites”, International Organization for Migration, 17 August 2023. “Alors que leurs conditions se dégradent, les déplacés internes de la violence de gangs tendent vers l’oubli”, Centre d’analyse et de recherche en droits de l’homme (CARDH), 25 September 2023.

⁸ “Severe Hunger Persists in Haiti as Violence Intensifies in the Capital”, World Food Programme, 19 September 2023. In mid-2023, the prices of most basic food products were 50 per cent higher than in 2022. See “Haïti – Mise à jour sur la sécurité alimentaire”, Famine Early Warning System Network, August 2023.

⁹ The gangs use violence against hostages, including collective rape, to force their families to pay the requested ransom. Families sometimes have to pay the ransom several times before the kidnapped person is released. “Kidnapping: bulletin #11. Janvier, février et mars 2023”, CARDH, October 2023.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Port-au-Prince, November-December 2023.

¹¹ The problem of waste management is particularly critical in certain gang-controlled areas of the capital. During the rainy season, enormous piles of rubbish accumulate, especially in low-lying neighbourhoods, creating flooding that severely disrupts traffic and contributes to the emergence or spread of waterborne diseases. Crisis Group interviews, Port-au-Prince, November-December 2023.

more than 25,000 officers would be warranted.)¹² In the past year alone, more than 1,000 officers stepped down.¹³ Problems with discipline and insubordination in the police force could jeopardise the foreign mission's operations. The seemingly minor issue of uniforms is one example. Many officers patrolling the streets sport balaclavas, despite a ban on wearing any accessory altering the official uniform except when conducting special operations.¹⁴ Because gang members often don balaclavas, people are often confused about who is a real police officer. To make matters worse, gang members sometimes wear old police uniforms, which were probably handed down by officers with gang connections.¹⁵

The gangs have profited from not only the breakdown in public authority but also entrenchment in Haitian society. These groups have historically enjoyed close links with Haitian politicians and wealthy businesspeople, who have long used them as private armies.¹⁶ Although the gangs have gained a degree of independence in recent years by expanding their own sources of income, insiders say ties between government officials, business leaders and the gangs are still strong. "Gangs are not only to be found in the lower part of the city", said a former official, pointing to patrons at a well-known bar in an upscale neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince. "People who collaborate with them hang out right here. They are the ones who live between legality and illegality, who make contacts with the banks, who help bring in weapons".¹⁷

With a view to severing these links, in 2022 the U.S. and Canada began imposing sanctions on leading politicians and businesspeople accused of directly or indirectly supporting Haitian gangs, including former President Michel Martelly and two former prime ministers.¹⁸ It is difficult to ascertain with full confidence that the sanctions have weakened the ties, but observers noted a rise in kidnappings after they were issued, which suggests that gangs resorted to new methods of obtaining money to make up for losing funds from wealthy sponsors.¹⁹ The UN Security Council also established a

¹² Based on the UN-recommended ratio of 2.2 police officers per 1,000 inhabitants, Haiti, with a population of around 12 million, should ideally have around 26,000 police officers.

¹³ Referring to the Humanitarian Parole policy introduced by the U.S. government in January 2023, which offers legal residency to a limited number of asylum seekers from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela, a source with knowledge of the Haitian police observed that "every month, the actual number of police officers decreases. Of course, the Biden program has made it easier for police officers to leave the country". Crisis Group interview, Port-au-Prince, November 2023.

¹⁴ The police issued this ban in early 2022. "La PNH interdit à ses agents le port de cagoule et de mouchoir lors des interventions sur la voie publique", *Gazette Haïti*, 3 March 2022.

¹⁵ A resident of Carrefour, where an illegal armed group made up mainly of police officers linked to gangs operates, said police commanders do not dare dismiss these officers, fearing retribution. Crisis Group interview, Port-au-Prince, November 2023. Several gangs have former or serving police officers in their ranks, and at least two prominent gang leaders, Jimmy "Barbecue" Chérisier and Kempes Sanon, were fired from the force. "Final report of the Panel of Experts on Haiti submitted pursuant to Resolution 2653 (2022)", UNSC S/2023/674, 15 September 2023.

¹⁶ Crisis Group Latin America & Caribbean Briefing N°44, *Haiti: A Path to Stability for a Nation in Shock*, 30 September 2021.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Port-au-Prince, December 2023.

¹⁸ "Treasury Sanctions Corrupt Haitian Politicians for Narcotics Trafficking", press release, U.S. Treasury Department, 4 November 2022; and "Canada sanctions former Haiti president Michel Martelly, two former prime ministers", *Miami Herald*, 21 November 2022.

¹⁹ International sanctions are already having a ripple effect in the country. Fearing loss of access to international banks, some financial institutions in Haiti have frozen credit cards for those included

sanctions regime for Haiti in 2022.²⁰ But more than a year after it was set up, and despite detailed reporting by a panel of experts, the Council has struggled to agree on which businesspeople or politicians to add to the sanctions list, which features only five notorious gang leaders at present.²¹

In the meantime, gangs have extended their territorial sway. One by one, the gateways to the capital have fallen under the control of different armed gangs, which have been collecting illegal tolls on all the main roads linking Port-au-Prince to the rest of the country.²² It is in these circumstances that the Security Council took the further step in October 2023 of authorising a multilateral force to help address the humanitarian and security crisis in Haiti.

B. *Two Gang Coalitions and a Vigilante Movement*

1. Two coalitions

Since the mid-2020s, most gangs in the capital have grouped themselves into two rival coalitions, known as the G9 and the Gpèp. The Gpèp – an alliance first led by alias Ti Gabriel but now without a clear chain of command – appears to be drawing most of its resources from activities such as kidnapping and drug trafficking.²³ Meanwhile, Jimmy “Barbecue” Chérizier, a G9 leader, pursues dominance on the streets through extortion and violence, while professing quasi-political motivations; however implausibly, he has said his group refrains from kidnapping or harming civilians. He and his allies refuse to profit from the poor, he insists, and in fact defend the vulnerable.²⁴ The coalitions’ fight for supremacy has resulted in thousands of deaths of both gang members and civilians, with the latter increasingly falling victim to indiscriminate attacks by the criminal bands.²⁵ The gangs have a wide range of weaponry, from homemade firearms to high-powered rifles, at their disposal.²⁶

on the U.S. and Canada sanction lists. Crisis Group interview, UN official, 18 December 2023. “Kidnapping: bulletin #11. Janvier, février et mars 2023”, op. cit.

²⁰ The sanctions were renewed in October 2023. “Resolution 2653”, UNSC S/RES/2653, 21 October 2022; “Resolution 2700”, UNSC S/RES/2700, 19 October 2023.

²¹ When the Security Council adopted the resolution creating the sanctions regime last year, the only person sanctioned was G9 leader Chérizier. “Resolution 2653”, op. cit. On 8 December, the Council added four Gpèp gang leaders to the list: Jonson André (aka Izo), Renel Destina (aka Ti Lapli), Wilson Joseph (aka Lanmò San Jou) and Vitelhomme Innocent. “Security Council 2653 Sanctions Committee Adds 4 Entries to Its Sanctions List”, UNSC SC/15520, 8 December 2023.

²² “You can no longer get in or out of the capital without paying the gangs”, said a transport union member. “This is how the year 2023 ends”. He went on to note that the more systematic collection of illegal tolls has reduced the number of kidnappings and freight truck hijackings on these roads. Crisis Group interview, Port-au-Prince, 28 November 2023. “Criminal violence extends beyond Port-au-Prince – The situation in Lower Artibonite from January 2022 to October 2023”, BINUH/OHCHR, November 2023.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, November-December 2023.

²⁴ “We don’t kidnap, we don’t rape, we are fathers’: Haiti gang steps in to fill gap left by political failure”, Sky News, 1 February 2023.

²⁵ Diego Da Rin, “New Gang Battle Lines Scar Haiti as Political Deadlock Persist”, Crisis Group Commentary, 27 July 2022.

²⁶ The UN Secretary-General has said more than 270,000 illegal firearms are held by civilians in Haiti, but a report by Haiti’s disarmament commission in 2020 estimated that the number of small arms in the country could be as high as 500,000. See “Small arms and light weapons Report of the

The second half of 2023 has seen an increase in violence, with gangs belonging to the G9 and the Gpèp coalitions ramping up attacks on each other, seemingly in a bid to gain territory before the multinational mission arrives. Some of the most brutal fighting followed the accidental death in mid-November of Iscard Andrice (known as Iskar), a founder and influential leader of the G9 coalition.²⁷ Iskar had been chief enforcer of a siege on the Brooklyn neighbourhood in Port-au-Prince since 2020, controlled by Gpèp's boss, alias Ti Gabriel.²⁸ The day after Iskar's death, Ti Gabriel launched attacks in the areas previously under his rival's control, with support from at least two Gpèp-affiliated gangs.²⁹ Over the course of three days, the clashes killed at least 166 people and displaced more than 1,000. An orphanage and a hospital were caught in the crossfire.³⁰

While internal fractures threaten the G9 coalition, the Gpèp has continued to expand its footprint. Alias Black Alex Mana, who took Iskar's place as a leader of the G9, was killed just a week after his boss died by a mid-level commander of his own gang.³¹ Gpèp gangs have also launched ruthless offensives in and around the capital and are consolidating alliances with armed groups in the Artibonite valley, where approximately 1,700 people have been killed, injured or kidnapped in under two years.³²

Even as they vie for power and territory, the gangs have shown that they are aware of the multilateral force's pending arrival, seemingly exploring postures that might help manage the risk of confrontation. In August, after Kenya offered to lead the mission, Chérizier hinted at the possibility of a truce.³³ A month later, in September, G9 and Gpèp leaders declared through voice notes on social media that they were willing to reduce violence under an initiative they called Viv Ansanm, a phrase that means "living together" in Haitian Creole.³⁴ But they also suggested another option,

Secretary-General", UNSC, 30 December 2019; and A. S. Fabre et al., "Weapons Compass: The Caribbean Firearms Study", CARICOM IMPACS/Small Arms Survey, April 2023.

²⁷ Iskar died on 12 November 2023 of an accidental gunshot wound. Crisis Group interviews, November-December 2023.

²⁸ Cité Soleil, a slum north of the capital home to some 300,000 people, has been the scene of the most violent clashes between the two coalitions since they emerged in 2020. For more details on these clashes, see Diego Da Rin, "New Gang Battle Lines Scar Haiti as Political Deadlock Persist", Crisis Group Commentary, 27 July 2022. Ti Gabriel, as head of a rival coalition, was Iskar's enemy. Iskar had also accused Gabriel of raping and killing his mother, for which he frequently vowed to take revenge.

²⁹ Gang members under the command of alias Izo and alias Jeff arrived by boat in Cité Soleil to assist Ti Gabriel in attacks on the G9-controlled areas surrounding Brooklyn. Members of the Chen Mechan gang, until recently part of the G9, arrived by land to support the assaults. Crisis Group interview, Port-au-Prince, 22 November 2023.

³⁰ "Statement by the Interim Humanitarian Coordinator in Haiti on the Recent Violence in Port-au-Prince", OCHA, 17 November 2023.

³¹ "Cité Soleil, chaise musicale sanglante à la tête du gang de Belekou", *Le Nouvelliste*, 21 November 2023.

³² "Criminal Violence Extends Beyond Port-au-Prince", BINUH/OHCHR, November 2023.

³³ "Haiti gang leader vows to fight any foreign armed force if it commits abuses", Associated Press, 17 August 2023. For the full press conference, see "Jimmy Chérizier di lap antre nan gè ak fòs etranje Kenya yo depi yo pa", video, YouTube, 16 August 2023.

³⁴ "Viv Ansanm": des bandits promettent la paix, des défenseurs de droits humains alertent la population", *Haiti Infos Pro*, 22 September 2023. In the voice notes they invited all the families who had been displaced to return to their homes, asked the diaspora to invest in the country and announced

with Chérizier indicating that gangs could eventually ally with the goal of confronting international forces from a position of greater strength. He declared that the gangs would welcome a foreign force if it came to help restore security in the country, but that “if they come to the community ghettos and start shooting and massacring, we Haitians will rise up and fight them to the last drop of blood”.³⁵

2. The Bwa Kale movement

Beyond the gangs, the security landscape includes vigilante groups that have sprung up across the capital as a form of citizen self-protection. Building on a long history of self-defence brigades, today's incarnation, the Bwa Kale movement, emerged in April 2023. Armed with all manner of weaponry, including high-calibre guns, the vigilantes have built barricades to deter gangs from entering their neighbourhoods. They have also attacked young men accused of belonging to criminal groups – lynching some 350 in just over three months.³⁶ The pushback had some success: many gangs had to withdraw to areas they fully controlled and halt their attacks on civilians for the first time in recent years.³⁷ But Bwa Kale's dark side was also evident. Although many Haitians celebrated the movement's rise, some government officials and international partners voiced concern that it could spark more conflict, decrying its brutal methods, including the extrajudicial killings.³⁸

Although Bwa Kale's offensive lasted only a few months and gangs have resumed encroaching upon new territory, certain brigades remain active. They continue to block numerous roads in Port-au-Prince with their improvised barricades, mostly after sunset. Experts worry that the multilateral mission's arrival could revitalise the vigilante groups, with uncertain effect. It could trigger attacks by them on individuals suspected of being gang members. But it could also foster alliances between these groups and specific gangs, building on partnerships that emerged earlier when vigilantes helped certain gangs fend off rivals.³⁹

that all Haitians would be able to move freely. The truce, however, broke down a few days later, when two Gpèp-affiliated gangs launched an offensive on the towns of Saut d'Eau and Mirebalais, north of the capital, attacking a hospital and burning down a police station. On the same day, G9 members murdered one of the leaders of their own coalition, allegedly for breaching Viv Ansanm's principles by hijacking a freight truck passing through the area he controlled. “Over 10,000 displaced in Haiti after violence escalates north of capital”, Reuters, 27 September 2023. Crisis Group telephone interview, 30 October 2022.

³⁵ “Jimmy Chérizier di lap antre nan gè ak fòs etranje Kenya yo depi yo pa”, op. cit. He also claimed that Henry's government was responsible for the insecurity that has prompted an international intervention.

³⁶ “Haiti: Deaths and injuries amid gang violence”, OHCHR, 18 August 2023.

³⁷ Da Rin, “Haitians Turn to Mob Justice as the Gang Threat Festers”, op. cit.

³⁸ Charli Carpenter, “Haiti's Bwa Kale Vigilantes Are Just Another Form of Gang Violence”, *World Politics Review*, 6 June 2023.

³⁹ “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Haiti submitted pursuant to Resolution 2653 (2022)”, op. cit., p. 17. Speaking to Crisis Group, a resident of a Port-au-Prince district where a vigilante brigade started operating a few months ago said people from the area knew it was linked to a well-known gang leader. Crisis Group interview, Port-au-Prince, November 2023.

C. Political Stalemate

Haiti's security crisis is made worse by its political situation. Having assumed power outside the normal electoral process in the wake of President Moïse's assassination, acting Prime Minister Henry lacks the mandate needed to take on the country's multidimensional challenges.⁴⁰ Since taking office, Henry has faced staunch opposition from many political parties and civil society groups. The opposition believes that Henry's unelected government holds on to power thanks solely to unflinching foreign support, despite what many perceive to be his dismal performance during two-plus years in power and the fact that Canada has sanctioned two of his former cabinet ministers for supporting gang activities.⁴¹ Some foreign capitals, in fact, hesitated to join the multinational mission precisely because of the deep political fractures in Haiti.⁴²

Efforts to foster a political agreement between Henry and opposition forces have made little progress. The parties have clashed over how to restore a balanced system of executive rule (the constitution provides for a prime minister to work alongside a president), with the opposition demanding more controls upon what they perceive as the unfettered powers afforded Henry.⁴³

Unfortunately, the last six months of multi-party negotiations have tended to exacerbate antagonism among political forces instead of bringing them closer to agreement. As part of the negotiations facilitated by a delegation from the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in Kingston, Jamaica, the main political groups opposed to Henry, including the so-called Montana Agreement and the parties PHTK (ie, Parti Haïtien Tèt Kale) and Fanmi Lavalas, signed a declaration in June calling for creation of a presidential council that would work alongside a prime minister during a transitional period until elections can be held.⁴⁴ But Henry balked, saying he was willing only to add new members to the existing High Transitional Council, a body created under an agreement reached on 21 December 2022 among various parties.⁴⁵ This half-concession did nothing to ease tensions.

⁴⁰ A recent poll indicates that more than 90 per cent of those who support intervention by a foreign force do not believe that Henry can solve the country's political problems. "Haiti poll finds majority favor international force amid worsening humanitarian crisis", *Miami Herald*, 31 October 2023.

⁴¹ The U.S. revoked the visas of former Justice Minister Berto Dorcé and former Interior Minister Liszt Quitel; subsequently, Henry forced them to resign, and soon thereafter, Canada sanctioned them. "U.S. calls for political accord in Haiti as Canada sanctions two former ministers", *Miami Herald*, 21 December 2022.

⁴² Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau insisted that a political agreement among Haitians was needed before determining what kind of security assistance Ottawa would provide. "Haitian leaders must all agree before Canada would lead a potential military intervention, Trudeau says", *The Canadian Press*, 20 November 2022.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, Port-au-Prince, November 2023.

⁴⁴ The Montana Agreement is a broad coalition of political and civil society groups that support what they call a "Haitian-led solution" to the crisis. It signed the Kingston declaration, along with the parties Force Louverture, Reformiste, En Avant, PHTK, UNIR, MPP, OPL, EDE, MOPOD and Fanmi Lavalas as well as the civil society organisation Nou PaP Dòm. "Déclaration conjointe de Kingston", 13 June 2023.

⁴⁵ On 21 December 2022, the acting prime minister signed an agreement with representatives of the private sector, civil society organisations and political parties, including dissident elements of the Montana Agreement and parties in a coalition called Groupe Concertation Politique pour un Compromis Historique. The agreement, which was called the National Consensus for an Inclusive Transition and

By September 2023, faced with Henry's stubborn refusal to agree to greater power sharing, and following an alarming upsurge in gang violence, some of the most prominent groups that had signed the joint declaration started hardening their positions.⁴⁶ The Montana Agreement called for the Henry's immediate resignation and accused the government of involvement in crimes against humanity because of its alleged gang ties.⁴⁷ Soon afterward, most of the remaining signatories of the Kingston declaration joined forces with other opposition groups to establish a new alliance.⁴⁸ As discussions about deploying a mission gained momentum in New York, the group presented to both domestic and international audiences a plan that points to the creation of a transitional government, which would fill the void left by Henry, presuming he steps down in February as promised in the "21 December agreement".⁴⁹

In response, the U.S. and other foreign powers with sway over Haiti's political players pressed Henry to make additional concessions, including granting further powers to the Transitional Council. CARICOM's facilitation team returned to Haiti twice between November and December, hoping that Henry's willingness to consider widening the Council's membership and vesting it with certain presidential powers would break the deadlock in negotiations.⁵⁰ But the facilitators continued to face steadfast calls for Henry's resignation from opposition groups.⁵¹

With little hope that the sparring groups will conclude a comprehensive agreement soon, it looks increasingly likely that the international mission will confront deep divisions among the country's main political forces when it arrives in Haiti. Crisis Group has recommended in the past that the government and opposition should reach an accord before troops deploy so that the mission does not get entangled in the political fray. That risk still exists, and foreign partners should continue to press all sides to reach a deal on establishing a unity government. But in the meantime, the need for an urgent response to extreme violence on the ground, as well as efforts by foreign partners to bring government and opposition together, suggest that political disunity is now a lesser danger than inaction.

Transparent Elections, set up a High Transitional Council whose main tasks were to designate a committee of experts charged with amending the constitution and participating in selecting members of the Provisional Electoral Council. In the pact – widely referred to as the "21 December agreement" – Henry promised to leave power by 7 February 2024, after elections that should have happened in 2023.⁴⁶ After a sharp reduction in gangs' criminal activities following Bwa Kale's emergence, several Gpèp gangs mounted assaults in different parts of the capital in August. By early September, when the Security Council began negotiations on the resolution for the security mission, the Grand Ravine gang's attacks in the southern Port-au-Prince district Carrefour-Feuilles alone had left some 20,000 people displaced.

⁴⁷ "Nòt pou laprès pou denonse epi frennen krim ak komplisite krim kont limanite kap fèt kont pèp aysyen an", Montana Agreement, 2 September 2023.

⁴⁸ "Des organisations politiques tentent de s'organiser pour mieux peser dans les négociations", *Le Nouvelliste*, 29 September 2023.

⁴⁹ Both the Montana Agreement and the other coalition, the United Front for an Effective and Lasting Solution to the Crisis, sought to form a new transitional government that would negotiate the arrangements for international security assistance for Haiti.

⁵⁰ "Statement – Eminent Persons Group Following Third Facilitation Visit to Haiti", CARICOM, 21 November 2023.

⁵¹ Calls for Henry's resignation came primarily from the Montana Agreement, the PHTK (the party of Moïse and Martelly) and EDE (the party of former Prime Minister Claude Joseph).

III. Putting the Mission into Practice

It is into this disheartening security and political setting that the Multinational Security Support mission (MSS) – which the UN Security Council authorised in October 2023 under its Chapter VII powers – will arrive to back up the Haitian police in fighting the gangs.⁵² Kenya will lead the MSS and provide 1,000 police officers as part of an ad hoc coalition of military police and civilians expected to be deployed from around a dozen countries; the mission will receive financial support from voluntary donations managed through a UN trust fund.⁵³

Nairobi's commitment to lead the force, announced in July 2023, ended the nearly year-long search for a country to take on this challenge.⁵⁴ For its part, Kenya saw volunteering to lead as an opportunity both to demonstrate solidarity with the African diaspora and to expand security cooperation with the U.S.⁵⁵ Although the Security Council's stamp of approval on the mission was regarded as critical by Kenya and other supporters of the initiative, the MSS will not be UN-led. Nor will it be funded through assessed contributions, and there remains much to do to prepare the ground for the mission's deployment.⁵⁶ The clock is ticking: the mission's one-year mandate started running on 2 October, when the resolution backing its creation was passed. While renewal is of course possible, that conversation in the Security Council will be easier if the mission has a track record of achievements or reason to believe they are forthcoming.

The Council provided the mission with a clearly defined but ambitious framework for its first twelve months of operations. With the overall objective of supporting the police's efforts to restore security and create conditions conducive to holding elections, the mission is empowered both to help plan and conduct operations jointly with the police against Haiti's gangs and to assist in protecting critical infrastructure and transport hubs.⁵⁷ The Council also requested that the mission help the Haitian police safeguard deliveries of humanitarian aid and support them and other UN en-

⁵² "Security Council Authorizes Multinational Security Support Mission for Haiti for Initial Period of One Year, by Vote of 13 in Favour with 2 Abstentions", UN, 2 October 2023. The Security Council's Chapter VII powers allow it to enable member states to engage in coercive measures such as the use of force, consistent with international law.

⁵³ In November, Kenya's interior minister stated that eleven countries, among them Senegal, Burundi, Chad and CARICOM members, were "set to join Kenya in the mission". "CS Kindiki makes case for deployment of Kenya police officers to Haiti mission before parliamentary security committees", press release, Kenyan Interior Ministry, 10 November 2023. News reports suggested that Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Belize, Guatemala, Jamaica, Italy, Mongolia, Peru, Senegal, Spain and Suriname have stated willingness to contribute equipment, funding or personnel. "Countries are offering to help Kenya take on deadly gangs in Haiti", *Miami Herald*, 21 September 2023.

⁵⁴ Tweet by Foreign and Diaspora Affairs Kenya, @ForeignOfficeKE, 10:34am, 29 July 2023; Colum Lynch, "The world is tired of nation building in Haiti", *Devex*, 3 March 2023; "Calls for Haiti intervention mount, but no one wants to lead", AFP, 26 July 2023.

⁵⁵ William Ruto, "Multilateralism on Trial", speech to the 78th Session of the UN General Assembly, 21 September 2023; Evelyne Musambi, "US and Kenya sign defense agreement ahead of planned Haiti deployment", Associated Press, 25 September 2023.

⁵⁶ "Security Council Authorizes Multinational Security Support Mission for Haiti for Initial Period of One Year, by Vote of 13 in Favour with 2 Abstentions", op. cit.

⁵⁷ "Resolution 2699", UNSC S/RES/2699, 2 October 2023, para 1, 1(a) and 1(b).

tities in combatting illicit arms trafficking. Crucially, the Council affords the mission exceptional but temporary authority to arrest and detain individuals (in cooperation with Haitian police) in order to maintain public safety.⁵⁸

This multi-pronged mandate emerged as a compromise among the U.S., Kenya and Haiti. At first, the U.S. had envisioned a multinational force with a light footprint and low visibility that would essentially protect state institutions and critical infrastructure. But after Kenya conducted an assessment visit in August 2023, it concluded that it would need offensive capabilities to not only protect critical infrastructure but also to meet the Haitian population's expectations. The mandate accommodates these two views and closely aligns with what Haitians expect an international mission to accomplish.⁵⁹

Diplomats are quick to champion the Council's approval of the mission as a gesture of international solidarity with Haiti, and the MSS structure as an emerging model for multilateral security cooperation.⁶⁰ Few dispute the Secretary-General's claim in August that UN peacekeeping would be ill suited to provide the robust intervention that Haiti needs to loosen the grip of armed gangs.⁶¹ Amid uncertainty about the future of UN peacekeeping globally, the ad hoc model of international cooperation put forward for Haiti will be watched closely.⁶² The attention only raises the stakes as the mission and its supporters work through myriad political and operational dilemmas before the force can be deployed in earnest.

Kenyan representatives have conducted multiple visits to Haiti to prepare the security forces, while contending with domestic legal challenges to their deployment. Though the Kenyan parliament approved the mission in mid-November, it has been challenged in the courts by an opposition party on the grounds that the constitution does not allow the government to deploy police abroad. The Supreme Court will rule on this suit in late January.⁶³

It remains unclear for now how quickly the mission can secure enough troops and funding to fulfil the entirety of its mandate. The most recent assessments by Kenya indicate that the mission should have up to 5,000 personnel and cost approximately \$240 million per year, though a Security Council diplomat suggested to Crisis

⁵⁸ The UN resolution "decides that the Multinational Security Support mission [...] in coordination with the Haitian National Police, may, to prevent the loss of life and within the limits of its capacities and areas of deployment, adopt urgent temporary measures on an exceptional basis [...] to help the Haitian National Police maintain basic law and order and public safety, including through arrest and detention, as necessary and in full compliance with international law, including international human rights law, as applicable". Ibid.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, UN Security Council official, 10 October 2023.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group Global Special Briefing N°11, *Ten Challenges for the UN in 2023-2024*, 14 September 2023.

⁶¹ "Letter dated 14 August 2023 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council", UNSC S/2023/596, 15 August 2023, p. 4.

⁶² The Secretary-General's New Agenda for Peace wholeheartedly supports the use of multinational forces, with the Security Council's authorisation, for enforcement operations in conflict-affected countries. "Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9: A New Agenda For Peace", UN, July 2023, p. 25. See also Richard Gowan, "What's New about the UN's New Agenda for Peace?", Crisis Group Commentary, 19 July 2023.

⁶³ "Kenya's high court extends a block on sending police to Haiti even as parliament approves deployment", Associated Press, 16 November 2023.

Group that these figures may be inflated.⁶⁴ For its part, Nairobi tentatively plans to deploy a few hundred military police in early 2024 (provided the Supreme Court dismisses the pending legal case), but it is unclear when the rest of the Kenyan contingent might follow.

Over the past few months, many countries have informally suggested they would also be willing to deploy personnel or contribute funding. So far, the bulk of financial support for the force, as well as most of the logistical and operational planning, has been provided by the U.S.⁶⁵ Washington plans to allocate \$100 million in funding to the MSS, and \$100 million more of what the State Department has described as “in-kind support – intelligence, airlift, communications and medical”.⁶⁶ Nairobi has announced that eleven countries will send officers to the MSS, while other countries have offered to provide officers, equipment or funding.⁶⁷

But not all of those offers are confirmed, and diplomats have suggested to Crisis Group that the search for countries willing to contribute military police is progressing more slowly than hoped.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the UN-managed trust fund has not received all the expected contributions, an issue of some importance given the Kenyan interior minister’s assertion that Nairobi will deploy its forces only when all required funding for the mission has been committed and made available.⁶⁹

There are other hurdles as well. Preparing an international force for a setting as perilous as Haiti would be daunting in any circumstance but doing so with an ad hoc coalition of countries presents additional problems. Some of these are structural and administrative. The Council expects the mission to establish an administration akin to that of a UN-led operation: it needs to acquire the right law enforcement expertise and to fulfil detailed requirements in reporting to New York.⁷⁰ Because the troops

⁶⁴ President William Ruto said in November the mission should be 5,000-strong, twice the number initially contemplated. “Report on Consideration of the Request for Approval by Parliament of Deployment of Officers of the National Police Service to the Multinational Security Support Mission for Haiti”, November 2023; “Address by President William Ruto to the EU Parliament”, 21 November 2023.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, UN official, 14 November 2023.

⁶⁶ “Acting Deputy Secretary of State and Under Secretary for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland and Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian Nichols After the Addressing the Urgent Security Situation in Haiti UN General Assembly Side Event”, U.S. State Department, 22 September 2023.

⁶⁷ See footnote 53.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, New York, November 2023.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, November 2023. “Kenya says it won’t deploy police to fight gangs in Haiti until they receive training and funding”, Associated Press, 9 November 2023.

⁷⁰ The mission, as described in the UN resolution, is expected to secure dedicated expertise on anti-gang operations, community-oriented policing, children and women’s protection, and preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence. The mission and participating countries are also expected to establish robust compliance mechanisms related to monitoring, investigating and reporting on violations of human rights (including sexual abuse and exploitation), and to meet environmental controls. It is expected to report on its concept of operations, sequencing of deployment, goals and end state, rules of engagement, financial and personnel needs before the mission is deployed. The MSS will have to report to the Council every three months on the implementation of its mandate, its exit strategy, and on issues of conduct and discipline, preventing sexual exploitation and abuse, and investigations of potential misconduct or excessive use of force. See “Resolution 2699”, *op. cit.*, paras 5-13, 18.

will not be wearing blue helmets, the MSS and its contributing countries cannot rely upon the UN Secretariat's automatic support to get these processes under way.⁷¹ But that will not diminish the considerable political and operational scrutiny that the Security Council is likely to apply to the mission even before the first officers reach Port-au-Prince.⁷²

This scrutiny will be strongest regarding matters that tainted UN peacekeepers' previous operations in Haiti. MINUSTAH's standing was deeply and tragically sullied by its role in spreading cholera and the implication of dozens of peacekeepers in cases of sexual exploitation and abuse.⁷³ The Security Council resolution creates safeguards to prevent such calamities from happening again. It calls for adopting appropriate wastewater management measures to prevent the introduction and spread of waterborne diseases, and establishment of robust, safe and accessible mechanisms to present complaints and carry out investigations to address any allegations of misconduct, including sexual exploitation and abuse.⁷⁴ Knowing that repetition of any of these misdeeds would likely trigger a massive outcry in Haiti, a country already wary of foreign intervention, diplomats are likely to closely watch how the MSS performs in these areas.

How the mission coordinates with other UN bodies will be another important ingredient in its effectiveness. BINUH, the above-referenced UN political mission now operating in Haiti, already supports the Haitian government in areas including political dialogue, elections, justice reform and violence reduction efforts. It also has a mandate to help build the Haitian police's operational and administrative capacities. Furthermore, twelve different UN agencies, funds and programs assist Haiti in a wide range of development and humanitarian initiatives.⁷⁵ UN officials are quick to emphasise that the MSS is not a UN-led operation, in part to avoid direct association with the mission should it falter. But alignment, if not direct collaboration, between the MSS and the UN as a whole will be critical to address the country's interlocking political and security dilemmas.

⁷¹ Resolution 2699 does permit the UN Secretariat to provide the mission with logistics support, provided such a request is formally made by the MSS and its donors, and that such a request can be fully funded by the voluntary contributions in the Trust Fund. See "Resolution 2699", *op. cit.*, para 16.

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, UN diplomats, October-November 2023. See also "The question concerning Haiti", UNSC S/PV.9430, 2 October 2023.

⁷³ "UN inaction denies justice for Haiti cholera victims, say UN experts", OHCHR, 30 April 2020.

⁷⁴ The UN Security Council also called upon countries contributing personnel to the mission to conduct training on human rights, child protection and sexual and gender-based violence both before and after deployment. "Resolution 2699", *op. cit.*, para 7, 12. A Haitian human rights defender expressed concern about how accessible these mechanisms would be for local organisations. "With MINUSTAH, we could take our complaints to the mission's headquarters, even if we didn't get a satisfactory response. Now we'll have to turn to Kenya and other contributing countries, which will be a real nightmare for us in Haiti". Crisis Group interview, Rosy Auguste Ducéna, program manager, RNDDH, Port-au-Prince, 28 November 2023.

⁷⁵ UN Haiti, "Our Team", October 2023.

IV. The Dilemmas of Taking on the Gangs

Foreign forces will encounter major operational hurdles as they seek to weaken the hold of Haiti's gangs. With the mission expected to number between 2,500 and 5,000 personnel – not all of them officers carrying out direct policing operations – Kenya, other contributing countries and Haitian authorities will have to carefully weigh their strategic priorities.⁷⁶ Given its limited scope, the mission is not intended to end Haiti's gang problem once and for all. But even seeking to achieve a limited set of objectives that could bring tangible improvements to people's lives – such as regaining control of southern and northern gateways to the capital and restoring free passage on these roads – will, unless something changes, mean engaging in frontal combat with several gangs.⁷⁷

The gangs appear to be mulling two ways of responding to the mission's arrival, according to interviews with people privy to the discussions.⁷⁸ On one hand, and despite the spike in inter-gang clashes, gang leaders are talking about reinvigorating the cooperative framework of Viv Ansanm, but this time for the purpose of forming a united front to face the foreign troops. In fact, a mediator between the rival gang coalitions showed Crisis Group evidence that the main gang leaders in the capital continue to communicate with one another and might be willing to battle the foreign mission together.⁷⁹ Sources tell Crisis Group that, if the gangs perceive the Kenyan-led force as poorly equipped or trained and thus ripe for defeat, they will not hesitate to attack the troops.⁸⁰ If Viv Ansanm were to be revived to coincide with the mission's deployment, it could give the gangs a significant boost and allow them to hit the international troops simultaneously on several fronts.⁸¹

⁷⁶ UN and Kenyan officials say they expect that a number of non-uniformed civilians will be on the mission, including 100 in charge of carrying out investigative and technical support tasks. Crisis Group interviews, November 2023.

⁷⁷ The southern exit from the capital along National Route 2 is controlled mainly by three gangs, Grand Ravine and 5 Segond (belonging to the Gpèp) and the Ti Bwa gang (from G9). The exit to the north along National Route 1 is controlled by several gangs operating in Canaan and Titanyen that are part of Gpèp. On several occasions, they have received reinforcements of men and weapons by boats coming from the 5 Segond gang's southern Port-au-Prince stronghold. An operation aiming to regain control of these sections of road will require clear tactical superiority to face dozens (even over a hundred armed) gang members. Crisis Group interviews, Haiti and by telephone, September-December 2023.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Haiti, November-December 2023.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, gang mediator, Port-au-Prince, 2 December 2023. The mediator facilitated talks among three rival gangs operating in Martissant and Fontamara (on the southern outskirts of Port-au-Prince) that culminated in a peace agreement signed in December 2022, which stands to this date.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Haiti, November-December 2023.

⁸¹ Experts are divided on the question of whether the gangs will have the wherewithal to coordinate successful attacks on the mission. Some note the gangs' lack of training and the fact that they have never faced a well-trained and equipped force before. Others, however, point to the gang members' willingness to fight, even in the direst of circumstances, and the strategic advantage that controlling territory throughout the whole of Port-au-Prince gives them. Yet several sources close to gang leaders told Crisis Group of discussions about the possibility of presenting a united front once the mission arrives. Crisis Group interviews, November-December 2023.

At the same time, however, these same gang leaders have also signalled that, if confronted with a force that has the evident capacity to overpower them, they would be willing to engage in discussions about how to disarm.⁸² Even the most powerful gangs might ponder alternatives to engaging in direct combat with international personnel and local police after one successful operation against the groups. Already, some gang leaders seem to be considering how to position their organisations politically and ideologically in order to garner greater popular support and prepare for talks. Although their histories suggest otherwise, some gang leaders have claimed their groups' fight is rooted in political causes.⁸³ Sources affirm that these leaders are interested in providing the gangs with a platform to start negotiations with a view to demobilisation should that seem the best course.⁸⁴

Assuming the mission does engage the gangs in combat, an outstanding dilemma for operational planners is how to protect civilians, particularly in Port-au-Prince, during offensive operations. The most powerful armed groups have established strongholds in crowded slums in and around the capital. Almost inevitably, mission personnel will be called on to conduct operations in these high-risk environments. For example, in their attempts to retake critical infrastructure like the Varreux oil terminal – which sits in the gang-controlled Cité Soleil district of Port-au-Prince – as well as the roads linking the capital to the rest of the country, they will have to find their way through densely populated areas. Some homes in these neighbourhoods are made of flimsy materials like wood and corrugated iron sheets, increasing the risk that stray bullets could hit those unable to flee.

Secondly, distinguishing between gang members and non-members in the civilian population will be difficult. Most gang members in Haiti do not wear uniforms or any distinctive symbol, except the occasional balaclava; nor do they have protective gear that could identify them.⁸⁵ They also know their way around the labyrinthine territory under their dominion, allowing them to blend in and out of the civilian population. The fact that very few of the foreign police officers will likely speak Haitian Creole (or even French) is likely to make interactions with residents harder, as the officers seek to ferret out the gang members.

Thirdly, collusion between the police and gangs will make leaked information another likely obstacle to operations. Corruption in the police force is a widespread problem that not only involves rank-and-file officers but also reaches the upper echelons of the institution. Two sources in the Haitian police who spoke separately to Crisis Group said senior commanders managed at least once to stop an operation to capture a powerful gang leader, allegedly because of the gangster's links to politicians or members of the force.⁸⁶

Finally, not all communities may be fully receptive to the mission. Even in areas where the gangs are very unpopular, the MSS will not necessarily be welcomed with

⁸² Some sources say the gangs particularly fear airpower, predicting that they will likely want to negotiate once they see the mission has it. Crisis Group interviews, Port-au-Prince, November-December 2023.

⁸³ "Haiti unrest: Sky meets Haiti's notorious gang leader 'Barbecue'", video, YouTube, 31 January 2023.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Port-au-Prince, November-December 2023.

⁸⁵ Only on rare occasions have certain gangs been seen to wear clothing coloured red or white during fights with rivals.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Port-au-Prince, December 2023.

open arms. The mission will have to contend with the hard reality that many Haitians have learnt to coexist with gangs that, for all practical purposes, have become local authorities. Some residents of gang-controlled areas in Port-au-Prince told Crisis Group they have become apprehensive about Haitian police raids, as these operations not only fail to break the gang's hold on their neighbourhoods, but also often spur gang members to retaliate against people perceived to be collaborating with the police.⁸⁷

V. Building Lasting Security

A. Preparing to Deploy

Haiti desperately needs international assistance, but the MSS must not be rolled out prematurely. Haitian experts who spoke to Crisis Group expressed the hope that the international mission would be able to intimidate the gangs into cooperating by showing up in numbers and projecting impressive capacity. One with deep knowledge of gang dynamics in the capital said: “[The mission] is going to have to focus on the perception of the balance of power, making a big show of force to let them know that if there are clashes, it's all over for them”.⁸⁸

That scenario hangs on the hope that sufficient numbers of trained and equipped forces are available for the mission. A thin, poorly prepared detachment would run the risk that gangs perceive weakness, press their advantage and tangle up the mission in knots. Moreover, even if the MSS can muster an impressive show of force, it will need to be prepared for the possibility that the gangs will fight tenaciously in places where the mission is seeking to wrest territory from their control. It will be up to the mission's force commander to decide when the MSS is ready to deploy with sufficient confidence that it will make the situation better rather than worse. In preparing to make that determination, certain steps may help.

First, as the legal challenge to Kenya's deployment makes its way through the Nairobi courts, the mission leadership should use the time to gain the best possible sense of the operating environment. The small advance contingent of several hundred Kenyan police that is due to arrive in Haiti early in 2024 should work with Haitian counterparts to map areas where gangs are dominant, assess their firepower and understand the threat levels in places where the MSS is expecting to deploy. They may wish to consider a strategy for asserting control in phases, first targeting areas with more accessible terrain, from which many civilians have already fled. In planning initial operations, they should also contemplate ways in which the force can display its numbers and capabilities – including overflights by drones or helicopters or motorcades of armoured personnel carriers – to increase the potential for deter-

⁸⁷ Talking about Martissant and Fontamara, an area controlled by three gangs, a resident said: “The police are not welcome in this area. We have been coexisting with the gangs and currently everything runs fine. If the police carry out operations in these areas, the population will not be happy. The police intervene and then leave, while the gangs stay and get furious. [After police operations in this area, gangs] raise the taxes and you can't even go out with your phone because they can frisk you and take it away so that people can't film them”. Crisis Group interview, Port-au-Prince, 28 November 2023.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, resident of area controlled by a powerful gang, Port-au-Prince, November 2023.

rence while taking care not to be provocative or create a risk of escalation. Of course, none of this will be possible unless Kenya gets the financial and troop support that others have committed to make, and additional contributions to fill any gaps.

Having strong intelligence gathering capacity will also be important for success. The mission could take cues from how MINUSTAH operated, establishing means of collecting information on gang activity from residents.⁸⁹ At the same time, the mission should take steps to protect operational security so that sensitive information is not compromised by the Haitian police, particularly given links between some officers and the gangs. International partners should support the acceleration of vetting efforts already under way by BINUH, bolstering new special units whose members have all been thoroughly scrutinised (including, but not exclusively, the Unité Temporaire Anti-Gang, or U-TAG).⁹⁰ Vetting should be built up progressively in order to check not only all members of the special units, but eventually every police officer.

The MSS should also place civilian protection at the centre of their strategy, leaning on expertise in civilian harm reduction developed by the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross and others.⁹¹ Basic precepts range from having reliable information about the areas where combat will take place to giving advance warning to civilians in these places to enable evacuation planning. This expertise will be especially important in designing rules of engagement for urban warfare that are protective of the civilian population, including with respect to selection of armaments.⁹² As Crisis Group has recommended in the past, Haitian police and foreign mission personnel will need to be able to warn people in conflict-affected areas of coming operations and to help them leave their homes safely, while commanders should always consider how to create a corridor that will allow residents to get out of areas where fighting is raging.⁹³ The mission will need to have French speakers on hand for these purposes.

The MSS's rules of engagement should also provide concrete instructions for addressing the challenges that self-defence groups could pose. As noted above, some of the vigilante brigades that have proliferated since the Bwa Kale movement emerged have been cooperating with gangs in parts of the country.⁹⁴ MSS forces could come

⁸⁹ Two models that could be useful are the toll-free hotline that MINUSTAH set up to collect anonymous tips on gang activities and the informant incentive program it also established. See Guy Hammond, "Saving Port-au-Prince: United Nations Efforts to Protect Civilians in Haiti in 2006–2007", Stimson Center, June 2012; and Walter Kemp, Mark Shaw and Arthur Boutellis, "The Elephant in the Room: How Can Peace Operations Deal with Organized Crime?", International Peace Institute, 3 June 2013.

⁹⁰ Vetting is now under way for members of several special Haitian police units, in hopes of making as much progress as possible before mission personnel are deployed. "United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti: Report of the Secretary-General", UNSC S/2023/768, 16 October 2023, p. 22. Crisis Group interview, Papa Samba Mbodj, police commissioner and head of BINUH's police and corrections unit, Port-au-Prince, 6 December 2023.

⁹¹ "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping", UN Department of Peace Operations, 2020. "Reducing Civilian Harm in Urban Warfare: A Handbook for Armed Groups", International Committee of the Red Cross, April 2023.

⁹² Sahr Muhammedally, "A Primer on Civilian Harm Mitigation in Urban Operations", Center for Civilians in Conflict, June 2022.

⁹³ Crisis Group Briefing, *Haiti's Last Resort: Gangs and the Prospect of Foreign Intervention*, op. cit.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, police officer, Port-au-Prince, 27 November 2023. See also "Final report of the Panel of Experts on Haiti submitted pursuant to resolution 2653 (2022)", op. cit., p. 17.

across these brigades, either working with the gangs or in self-defence mode, threaded among angry crowds seeking to lynch suspected criminals. Either way, the best strategy for dealing with the vigilantes is to avoid these scenarios by trying to bring them onside as soon as possible. As a first step, the police should make contact with the brigades and encourage them to collaborate with the authorities by providing information that may help to capture suspected gang members, while urging them to desist from carrying out acts of violence on their own.

Besides its mandate to counter the gangs, the mission will need to be especially well prepared to prevent gender-based violence committed by its own members. The scandal of the “MINUSTAH babies”, the result of peacekeepers impregnating hundreds of women, many of them minors, before abandoning them, continues to cloud that mission’s legacy.⁹⁵ Foreign personnel should receive the requisite training before they deploy to prevent such cases from recurring.⁹⁶ The mission will also need training to address the gangs’ widespread use of sexual violence. Ideally, foreign partners could also second at least one gender expert to help the mission monitor and report on any abuses, as well as pay local staff who can act as community liaisons to detect cases of sexual exploitation and violence early.⁹⁷ Women should of course also be appropriately represented among the deploying forces.

B. Critical Tasks for Enduring Success

Beyond the work that is required to prepare for deployment, certain key tasks will be critical to the mission’s enduring success.

The first will be to increase the number of police officers who can start working hand in hand with the MSS’s personnel and eventually be ready to take over from the mission. International assistance – through BINUH and schemes such as the Joint Programme for the Haitian National Police (commonly referred to as the UN basket fund) – to bolster the Haitian National Police will have to be greatly expanded if Haitian authorities are to have a chance of building a stable police force that can keep gangs and other criminal organisations in check. Consistent with the above recommendations, the continued strengthening of fully vetted special Haitian police units dedicated to joint anti-gang operations, and efforts to vet the entire force over time, could help build the local force’s capacity to collect and use intelligence for planning and conducting operations.

Secondly, serious thought has to be given to what demobilisation of the gangs might look like. Strengthening the police and ensuring that offensive operations are effective will not be enough to consolidate state control in areas retaken by security forces. Killing or capturing top gang leaders is unlikely to prevent the reconfiguration of armed groups, and the removal of gang commanders may instead lead to escalat-

⁹⁵ “They put a few coins in your hands to drop a baby in you’ – 265 stories of Haitian children abandoned by UN fathers”, *The Conversation*, 17 December 2019.

⁹⁶ Officers should receive training on the rights of victims of sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse, ideally before they arrive in Haiti. Crisis Group interview, Phoebe Donnelly, International Peace Institute, New York, 8 December 2023.

⁹⁷ Community liaison assistants and community alert networks have been widely used in the Democratic Republic of Congo to detect conflict-related sexual violence. Crisis Group interview, Jenna Russo, International Peace Institute, New York, 8 December 2023.

ing violence among factions that splinter from the original band, as has happened elsewhere.⁹⁸ Prisons are extremely overcrowded, meanwhile, and the justice system will be unable to handle the thousands of cases likely to reach it once the MSS starts arresting gang members, making an alternative route to allow these young men, many of them minors, to abandon violent crime indispensable.⁹⁹

The Haitian state, with support from foreign powers and donors, should look to establish demobilisation pathways for hundreds, or even thousands, of gang members. These are sorely lacking at present. President Moïse reactivated the National Commission for Disarmament, Dismantlement and Reintegration in 2019, but it is barely functioning, and its members have not been paid for more than three years.¹⁰⁰ Haiti and its international partners, particularly the UN (including the division of demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration of the Department of Peace Operations), should work with local mediators who have the gangs' trust to design schemes that would enable individuals willing to defect to do so safely or to initiate group processes if an entire gang is willing to stop fighting.

C. *Major Reforms and Initiatives*

While quick wins by the MSS could help bring about a long-awaited improvement in Haiti's security conditions, structural reforms will be needed to put a brake on the country's cycles of violence.

Both Haitian authorities and the MSS should plan for initial policing operations in gang-affected areas to phase into a community policing strategy, aimed at building better links between civilians and the police in former gang bastions. "A strategy to counter gangs based exclusively on aggressive crackdowns is unlikely to succeed", said a former director of the Haitian National Police. He argued that achievements in fighting gangs during his term were due, in part, to work that focused on improving trust between police and residents, which helped the police understand gang habits in these areas.¹⁰¹ Mission staff, in cooperation with international partners and civil society organisations, should start identifying community leaders who can help the police establish solid connections with those living in gang-controlled territories.

⁹⁸ Jane Esberg, "More than Cartels: Counting Mexico's Crime Rings", Crisis Group Commentary, 8 May 2020.

⁹⁹ A Haitian security expert said to Crisis Group: "Where are the prison facilities to put thousands of gang members? Is the international community suggesting that we kill thousands of lads? What structures are in place to reintegrate these young people into society? I'm appalled by what's left unsaid". Crisis Group interview, Port-au-Prince, 29 November 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Port-au-Prince, December 2023. The National Commission for Disarmament, Dismantlement, and Reintegration was established in August 2006, at first working closely with MINUSTAH. Its goals were to coordinate the disarmament of gangs, lead on the state's violence reduction strategy and improve communication with the public. After failing to reach meaningful rates of disarmament, the Commission ceased operations in 2011 before being reactivated eight years later. Crisis Group Latin America & Caribbean Report N°44, *Towards a Post-MINUSTAH Haiti: Making an Effective Transition*, 2 August 2012. The Commission is part of a task force on disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration and community violence reduction (DDR) created in 2020 that organises regular meetings between government officials and UN agencies. The task force is working on a concept note about the specific form of DDR needed in Haiti.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, Mario Andrésol, former Haitian National Police director (2005-2012), 23 November 2023.

The Haitian state, with the support of international donors, should also over time be prepared to launch programs aimed at rebuilding public facilities like schools, hospitals and police stations in these neighbourhoods. Aside from the urgent need for better facilities, such projects would provide jobs, helping improve the livelihoods of thousands of vulnerable families. Foreign government and private-sector support will be needed to create additional programs that can create stable, lawful employment opportunities for demobilised gang members.¹⁰²

For the country to make strides toward ensuring the safety of its citizens, two bases of the gangs' enduring power will also have to be tackled. Stemming the illegal flow of weapons and ammunition into the country, much of which comes from the region, including the U.S., the Dominican Republic and Jamaica, will be essential.¹⁰³ The Security Council's July resolution renewing BINUH's mandate urges member states to take all necessary measures to stop illegal arms from entering Haiti, "including through inspecting cargo to Haiti, in their territory".¹⁰⁴ Washington is already enhancing its capacity to investigate and prosecute individuals involved in transnational crime, such as with the Transnational Criminal Investigative Unit being created in Haiti. But there will additionally need to be robust, concrete measures to improve controls upon outbound shipments at the ports that send the most weapons and ammunition to Haiti, especially in Florida.¹⁰⁵

The other source of gang power that will need to be addressed is the strong bond between gangs and Haitian business and political elites. Individuals who support criminal groups and benefit from illicit activities such as international drug trafficking must be investigated and held accountable, including through international sanctions, but also through prosecution of those for whom there is sufficient evidence of sponsoring violent groups.¹⁰⁶ Stronger intelligence gathering and international cooperation will be needed to sever the connections among politicians, businesspeople and gangs, which should remain an abiding concern for Haiti's foreign partners as they seek to help the country combat gang violence.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Haiti's political deadlock must be resolved. There is still no straightforward route to establishing an elected government with strong public support. Thus, Haiti's international partners should continue pressing all sides to form a transitional government with broad-based backing. Recent CARICOM-led negotiations, as well as dialogues led by other national and international mediators, point to divisions within the opposition. Some groups insist that Henry fulfil his promise (made in the "21 December agreement") of leaving power by

¹⁰² Past job creation programs in Haiti have rarely been based on studies of community needs, often leading to oversupply of certain skilled workers. Crisis Group interview, UN official, Port-au-Prince, 1 December 2023.

¹⁰³ "Haiti's Criminal Markets: Mapping Trends in Firearms and Drug Trafficking", UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2 March 2023.

¹⁰⁴ "Resolution 2692", UNSC S/RES/2692, 14 July 2023, p. 6.

¹⁰⁵ "Haiti's criminal markets", *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group Briefing, Ten Challenges for the UN in 2023-2024, *op. cit.*

February. But many acknowledge he is unlikely to step down and worry that the mission's arrival will inevitably strengthen his hand.¹⁰⁷

An agreement that includes Henry alongside the most important opposition figures, particularly those from parties that plan to participate in the next elections, is needed to create the foundation for a transitional government. This government would then be charged with restoring functioning institutions, such as a Provisional Electoral Council, so as to pave the way for general elections. For better or worse, this sequencing remains essential. Should these polls be organised solely by Henry's government, without support from other parties, tensions would be sure to rise even higher. Haitians might also well distrust a rushed process that they perceive as partisan or opaque, reproducing the low voter turnout in the 2016 presidential election.¹⁰⁸ Polls lacking cross-party support could also see a repeat of the violence and institutional corrosion that followed the hastily organised elections after the 2010 earthquake.¹⁰⁹

VI. Conclusion

Haiti's catastrophic wave of gang violence, not to mention its political breakdown and humanitarian emergency, have persuaded the country's authorities and much of the public that there is no better prospect than armed support from abroad. If well-planned and executed, the Kenyan-led multinational mission that is scheduled to send its first small contingent to Haiti in early 2024 may be able to give Haitians reprieve from the gangs' depredations, setting the stage for reforms that will be indispensable for their future well-being.

But rigorous attention to both short- and long-term considerations will be essential to the mission's success. Should forces deploy before they reach the numbers and obtain the training that will allow them to operate effectively and with adequate protection for themselves and civilians in Haiti's close urban quarters, then the gangs could well turn the tables on them, discrediting the whole enterprise. Unless the force's efforts are complemented by downstream reforms, and a political settlement that the country's factions in government and opposition see as legitimate, then any good work it does could quickly be imperilled.

The prospect of an international mission to help restore Haiti's security and address its humanitarian crisis offers Haitians a glimpse of safety and dignity. It is essential that the opportunity not be wasted.

Port-au-Prince/New York/Washington/Brussels, 5 January 2024

¹⁰⁷ Monique Clesca, "Haiti's Rule of Lawlessness: Why a Military Intervention Would Only Entrench the Island's Problems", *Foreign Affairs*, 10 March 2023; "Haitian-American leaders call on Biden to dump Ariel Henry", *The Hill*, 24 September 2023.

¹⁰⁸ The late Moïse won the 2016 election with just under 600,000 votes, with a turnout of less than 20 per cent. Crisis Group Briefing, *Haiti: A Path to Stability for a Nation in Shock*, op. cit., p. 10.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group Briefing, *Haiti: A Path to Stability for a Nation in Shock*, op. cit.

Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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