



Haiti: A New Government Faces Up to the Gangs

Haiti has established a new transitional government to combat surging gang violence and tackle the resulting humanitarian crisis. In this excerpt from the Watch List 2024 – Spring Update, Crisis Group explains how the EU and its member states can help.

Gang violence, which has tightened its grip on Haiti since President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated in July 2021, took a drastic turn for the worse at the end of February. Rather than fighting each other for turf, as they have done for years, the most powerful criminal gangs operating in Port-au-Prince and its surroundings made a non-aggression pact in order to forge a united front against the Haitian authorities. The gangs, which had been loosely organised in two rival coalitions known as the G9 and the Gpèp, proceeded to launch coordinated attacks on government buildings and critical infrastructure while the interim prime minister, Ariel Henry, was out of the country. In an unprecedented offensive, they assaulted dozens of police stations, the country's two largest penitentiaries (from which some 4,600 prisoners escaped), the main seaports and the international airport in Port-au-Prince, which is only now very slowly resuming operations. The groups in this new federation, called Viv Ansanm ("living together" in Haitian Creole), have also been looting and burning down schools, health facilities, businesses and private residences, upending the lives of thousands of people and exacerbating the deep privation already besetting the country.

As Haiti's crisis has worsened over the last three years, Caribbean neighbour states, along

with foreign powers such as the U.S., Canada and the EU, have been pressing the country's politicians to conclude a power-sharing agreement, which all have seen as a necessary step on the way to restoring democratic institutions, breaking the gangs' stranglehold and addressing the country's humanitarian emergency. In April, a way out of the protracted political deadlock finally began to emerge. Henry, who had been de facto head of state since Moïse's murder, resigned under pressure from the U.S., and Haiti's most important political groups came together with private-sector and civil society representatives to form a transitional government under a plan hatched with international support. The new government's first task is to enable deployment of the Kenya-led multinational security mission authorised by the UN Security Council in October 2023 to help the police fight the gangs. As it strives to regain control of gang-held areas, the new administration will also have to start preparing the ground for elections. It will not be easy, and the transitional government's first weeks have been marred by internal discord. But the problems are bigger than that: Haitian institutions have been gravely weakened as a whole, and the state will need a surge of international support to consolidate its authority throughout the country and meet people's basic needs.

The EU and its member states should:

- Provide financial and in-kind support to help the Kenya-led multinational security mission acquire the staff and equipment it needs to counter armed gangs as soon as possible, while also helping ensure appropriate training and other measures to guard against acts of gender-based violence and other abuses of civilians by foreign officers. European aid can also enable the mission to hire local experts as community liaisons.
- Using the EU's autonomous framework for sanctions, impose comprehensive restrictive measures on powerful individuals and entities that sponsor or have sponsored gang activity in Haiti.
- Assist the Haitian state in developing a demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration program for thousands of gang members.
- Help the incoming transitional government rebuild democratic institutions and eventually convene national, regional and local elections.
- Bolster the Haitian authorities' response to the humanitarian crisis through increased funding for food aid, access to water and health care services, and resettlement programs for displaced persons.

Haiti's Parlous State

Haiti's crisis is multifaceted, but the most immediate peril to many people's lives is posed by criminal gangs, which have long outmatched the police in organisation and firepower. With the government in disarray following Moïse's assassination, gangs expanded their ranks and built up their arsenals. Combined, the gang coalitions now have around 5,000 members. They tote heavy weapons such as AR15s, AK47s, Galils, .50 sniper rifles and belt-fed machine guns. The gangs have also greatly widened their territorial footprint: they operate in almost the entire capital and a sizeable portion of the Artibonite department (Haiti's breadbasket), and they have recently started spreading toward the south of the country. Gangs look to dominate strategic locations for various illicit purposes, among them extorting businesses and residents, establishing improvised highway tolls, and asserting control of larger areas where they keep their kidnapping victims.

For over two years, the G9 and Gpèp coalitions waged a brutal battle for hegemony using indiscriminate violence against civilians, including collective rapes of women and children, with the goal of intimidating residents and discouraging them from collaborating with rival groups. But as plans to deploy an

international security mission led by Kenya began to move forward, the top gang leaders started piecing together a scheme to stop fighting each other and unite their forces. The late February attacks, timed to coincide with Henry's trip to Nairobi to hammer out the details of deploying the multinational force, aimed to paralyse the capital by simultaneously hitting locations throughout the metropolitan area, thereby stretching the police to the maximum. The gangs' main goals were to derail plans to send the mission, force Henry to resign and secure from his replacement an amnesty for all their crimes. As of early March, there were more than 360,000 internally displaced people in Haiti, about half of them children. Since then, around 100,000 people – some of whom were already among the displaced – have fled the capital to escape the violence. There is a high risk of cholera spreading in the ramshackle camps where many now live without adequate access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities.

As gangs wreaked havoc in Port-au-Prince, several prominent Haitian political groups and private-sector representatives agreed to form a transitional presidential council at a meeting convened by members of the Caribbean

Community, better known as CARICOM, on 11 March. It was decided that the council should comprise seven voting members and two non-voting observers from civil society. After lengthy negotiations, all the groups appointed their representatives, and the council was officially sworn in on 25 April in a brief ceremony under heavy police guard, while gunshots from gangs clashing with police rang out in the distance. The day before, Henry, who had been exiled in the U.S., resigned from his post at Washington's request.

The presidential council has had a rocky start, and its first weeks in office saw a swift return to polarisation and traditional political manoeuvring. Vying to secure key posts in the administration, four of the political groups involved made a pact to vote the same way on every question and thus control the council's decisions. Their first move was an attempt to impose a president and a prime minister. Faced with threats from the remaining council

members to withdraw from the body, the groups reversed course, agreeing to a rotating presidency and a minimum of five votes for every major decision.

This inauspicious start complicates the ambitious roadmap toward strengthening and restructuring Haiti's state institutions charted by the agreement that paved the way for the new administration. The transitional government is meant to organise general elections so that local, regional and national authorities can be sworn in by February 2026, almost a decade after elections last took place. A first step will be to appoint a provisional electoral council, which is expected to carry out an assessment of the country's voting system. This council's recommendations on how to conduct the polls are supposed to help shape a constitutional reform process before elections are held. Even in the best of circumstances, the transitional government might struggle to accomplish these goals in such a short time.

Preparing to Face the Gangs

Plans to hold long overdue elections will depend on progress in blunting the threat posed by the gangs. As the rampage beginning at the end of February demonstrated, these groups have a clear upper hand over the Haitian police force, which suffers from scarce resources, pervasive corruption and rising attrition rates. International assistance has recently enabled the police to create elite units with the training and equipment to combat gangs, but these alone cannot change the balance of power. Without significant outside support, the police and the embryonic armed forces – re-established by Moïse in 2017 after being disbanded over twenty years earlier – will not succeed in regaining control of key sites and restoring a modicum of order to the capital.

Help should be on the way, in the form of the Kenya-led multinational security mission authorised by the UN Security Council. But the mission's dispatch has encountered several delays, despite seven countries having

promised to contribute military police, and the challenges it will face are daunting. First came a judicial appeal in Nairobi, which aimed to stop the Kenyan government from sending a contingent to Haiti on the grounds that deploying police officers abroad, rather than military forces, violates the Kenyan constitution unless a reciprocal agreement with the receiving country is in place. Then came the uncertainty of the political transition in Port-au-Prince. Those two issues are resolved, so the main obstacle to prompt deployment is now financing. Only \$21 million of the \$600 million Kenya estimates the mission will cost are available in the trust fund set up by the UN for this purpose. Despite the funding gap, U.S. and Kenyan officials were planning that the mission would begin deploying around the time of President William Ruto's state visit to Washington on 23 May. But things are not ready on the ground (though senior commanders arrived on 20 May). Once on the ground, the mission will likely have its hands

full immediately, as it may have to respond to coordinated attacks from Viv Ansanm. It will need to deter and, where necessary, fight the gangs, while ensuring the protection of civilians; Crisis Group has previously offered recommendations for how to approach these imperatives.

Even if the mission handles those challenges well, it is unlikely to facilitate enduring positive change unless progress is made in addressing the roots of gang expansion. Haitian elites have long used non-state armed groups as tools to impose their political and economic authority, especially in metropolitan Port-au-Prince. They provided gangs with funds, weapons and impunity as needed, in exchange for which the armed groups helped clamp down on protests, ensure the victory of particular candidates in elections and protect turf for legal and illegal businesses. While still extant, the ties between gangs and elites have been fraying. Meanwhile, the personal ambitions of the most prominent gang leaders and the fierce competition among gang coalitions, among other issues, have compelled the groups to seek new sources of funding – including through protection rackets, kidnapping and, more recently, drugs and arms trafficking.

Foreign powers have sought to break the links between Haitian gangs and elites, but these measures have become less effective over time. The U.S. and Canada imposed unilateral sanctions on some of the most influential politicians and powerful businesspeople, including two former presidents, two former prime ministers and several former senators who are accused of having directly or indirectly supported the gangs. Meanwhile, the UN established a special sanctions regime in October 2022 specifically aimed at cutting ties between the gangs and their third-party sponsors. More than a year and a half later, however, Security Council members have agreed to include only five gang leaders on whom financial sanctions and travel bans have an extremely limited impact. The sanctions have not focused on the elite patrons whose activities must be curtailed in order to sever the pernicious linkages that have allowed gangs to thrive. The European Council announced in July 2023 that the EU would impose its own sanctions to complement those levelled by the Security Council, but so far it has only penalised the same five gang leaders identified by the Security Council.

What the EU Can Do

Restoring order to Haiti, while an urgent task, will not happen overnight, and rebuilding a state that can serve the population will take years. The European Union has much to contribute to this effort both right away and in the long term.

Hopes of respite from the gangs' oppressive hold now hinge on the Kenya-led mission. The EU has declined to fund the mission but has promised to support "complementary actions that can provide an enabling environment for the work of the mission or uphold the sustainability of its results". The EU should reconsider this decision. While ensuring the conditions for rebuilding state institutions and support for

civil society are of great importance, without enough funding the mission could fail, endangering progress in addressing the political and humanitarian crises. The EU could play a major role in plugging the resource gap by contributing to the trust fund created by the UN to support the effort, as well as by directly assisting Kenya, with which it is working to strengthen security and defence ties. It should do so. So should EU member states, particularly France, given its colonial history in Haiti. These funds could help pay for the logistical costs of deploying the mission and increased vetting and training for special Haitian police units, as well as for hiring local experts who could act as

community liaisons to monitor and promptly report any cases of abuse of force or sexual exploitation and violence.

Past international security interventions have succeeded in achieving a fleeting reduction in violence, only for criminal groups to resurge once foreign troops have left. To prevent the Kenyan-led mission from achieving nothing more than a short-lived respite, the Haitian government and counterparts such as the EU should back complementary measures aimed at dismantling these armed groups and the networks that have enabled their expansion. They will need, first, to sever the links between powerful gangs and influential politicians and businesspersons; and secondly, to find ways to entice gang members to abandon the gangs and re-enter civilian life.

At first, sanctions played an important role in deterring elites from collaborating with gangs, but the focus (particularly from the UN) on gang leaders, and not those who have financed them, appears to have undermined their effectiveness. During the review of its sanctions regime to be carried out in July, the EU should consider including new individuals, in particular powerful elites and less visible intermediaries who play an important role in arms trafficking and money laundering. More broadly, an independent judicial system that is resistant to manipulation by the executive will be essential to efforts to permanently break links between gangs and powerful individuals in Haiti, as well as to attempts at curbing high-level corruption. In line with previous Crisis Group recommendations, the new government has said it will set up a specialised financial prosecuting authority to probe the corruption that has drained public finances. Through its Multinational Indicative Programme for Haiti for 2021-2024 – which aims, among other things, to make the state more accountable to the citizenry – the EU should support creating this body and provide legal assistance to launch investigations as soon as possible. Rapid action on this front would be a strong deterrent to politicians who might be tempted to misuse

their powers or embezzle public funds during the transitional period or after the elections.

Meanwhile, exit paths will be indispensable for individuals willing to leave the gangs. Upon the mission's arrival in Haiti, the Haitian authorities and their foreign partners should identify people who can engage in the delicate tasks of establishing channels of communication with the gangs to negotiate ceasefires; opening humanitarian corridors; and tailoring demobilisation and disarmament programs. The EU could provide technical and financial support to these endeavours, including by strengthening the operational capacities of the National Commission for Disarmament, Dismantlement and Reintegration, a Haitian institution that has been dormant for several years, but that could develop programming to enable gang members who are willing to quit to do so safely. The EU could also support the new authorities in designing a legal framework to reintegrate gang members who decide to turn themselves in, with a special approach to minors, who account for a large proportion of gang members; and provide technical support to the Commission to help it collect, document and dispose of the weapons these individuals hand in.

The EU should also look to support the transitional government as it prepares for fresh elections before February 2026, offering technical assistance to the electoral council as it evaluates the existing system and helping build its capacity to organise transparent, competitive polls. The EU could also offer financial and logistical assistance to the consultations that the new government hopes to conduct throughout the country to gather input on desired constitutional changes.

In response to Haiti's dire humanitarian emergency, the EU has already allocated €20 million for the country in 2024, earmarked to respond to the needs of people affected by gang violence, provide educational services and reduce the risk of cholera spreading. Extra help will be needed to support local and international humanitarian partners to establish

displacement camps with adequate facilities to accommodate the needy, particularly as many of the makeshift camps have extremely limited access to food, water and health services, and numerous cases of sexual and gender-based violence have been reported there. As the number of displaced persons is likely to increase during the security mission's first few months, the EU should also increase its contributions to the severely underfunded UN humanitarian plan, which is essential to provide much-needed aid to the more than four million people who cannot get enough to eat. Unlike in places such as Gaza or Sudan, relief agencies in Haiti can reach hungry populations, but they lack the resources to respond to all basic needs.

Finally, Haiti will need help to restore some sense of normalcy after years under the thumb of gangs. Quick-impact programs to create jobs in areas retaken from the gangs, for example, could provide livelihood alternatives to locals. These could focus at first on rebuilding public infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, public parks and police stations, as well as on setting up drinking water and electricity services. While curbing Haiti's extreme violence is the top priority, the EU could be an essential partner in building a state that can help Haitian citizens lead dignified lives. ■

