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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# A CRITICAL MOMENT

**HAITI'S GANG CRISIS AND  
INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES**

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## FROM VISION TO ACTION: A DECADE OF ANALYSIS, DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.

# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

|                  |                                                                            |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>BINUH</b>     | United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti                                  |
| <b>BSAP</b>      | Brigade de Sécurité des Aires Protégées (Protected Areas Security Brigade) |
| <b>EU</b>        | European Union                                                             |
| <b>G9</b>        | G9 Fanmi e Alye (G9 Family and Allies), criminal federation of gangs       |
| <b>G-Pèp</b>     | G-People, criminal federation of gangs                                     |
| <b>HNP</b>       | Haitian National Police                                                    |
| <b>MINUJUSTH</b> | United Nations Mission for Justice Support in Haiti                        |
| <b>MINUSTAH</b>  | United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti                              |
| <b>MSS</b>       | Multinational Security Support Mission in Haiti                            |
| <b>UN</b>        | United Nations                                                             |
| <b>UNSC</b>      | United Nations Security Council                                            |
| <b>UNSG</b>      | United Nations Secretary General                                           |



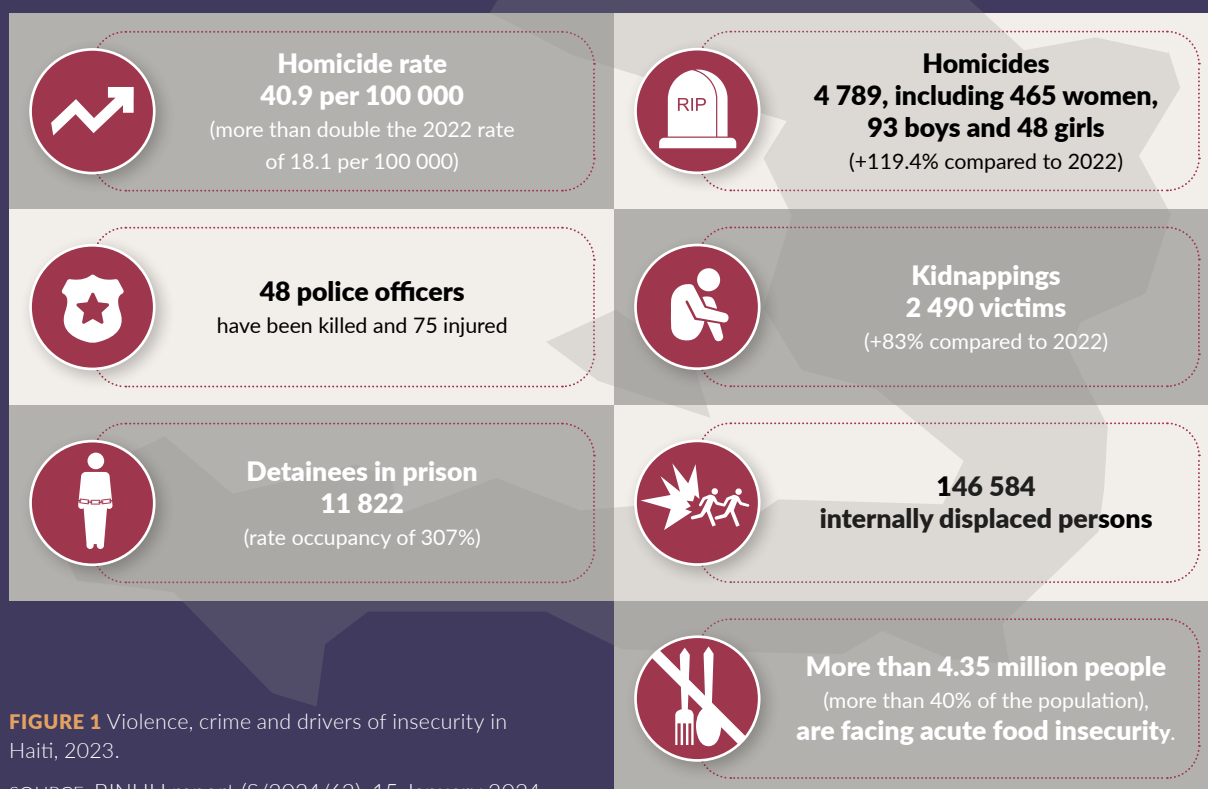
## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the course of 2023 and early 2024, security has continued to deteriorate alarmingly in Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, and in rural areas in the centre and south of the country.<sup>1</sup> Criminal gangs, the main drivers of this degradation, have grown in strength and capacity, enabling them to supplant in part or in full the control of government forces.<sup>2</sup>

The gangs' domination of critical infrastructure, such as commercial and oil port terminals, major roads, and population centres has heightened their influence over Haiti's economy and political system. The gangs have also imposed governance on major parts of Port-au-Prince, leading both to rising criminal predation and human rights violations, including gender-based violence.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, 2023 saw the development of particularly strong vigilante movements while the first weeks of 2024 witnessed the rise of violent political leaders, adding to an already disastrous security situation. As one United Nations (UN) report bluntly noted: 'The situation is unravelling.'<sup>4</sup>

The Haitian crisis worsened critically in 2023. UN reports indicate that in 2023, over 4 789 people were murdered, 1 698 injured and 2 490 kidnapped, with a 2023 homicide rate of 40.9 per 100 000, more than double the 2022 rate.<sup>5</sup> Besides these figures, the nature of the criminal actors has been profoundly transformed, posing a series of challenges to international intervention. Over the past five years, gangs have undergone a radical evolution, going from rather unstructured actors dependent on resources provided by public or private patronage to violent entrepreneurs who have been able to convert their territorial power into governance capabilities. This shift has been fuelled by the gangs' unprecedented access to firearms and the Haitian state's inability to halt their expansion, professionalization and propensity to impose their rule over ever larger territories, as well as by ongoing collusion by elements of the country's political and economic elites.

In October 2023, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted a resolution authorizing a non-UN multinational security support (MSS) mission to Haiti. After long negotiations, the Kenyan government agreed to lead the deployment, aimed at supporting the Haitian National Police (HNP) in addressing gang violence and re-establishing security,<sup>6</sup> although the planned operation is currently being challenged in the Kenyan courts.<sup>7</sup> This resolution came after the UNSC agreed a sanctions regime for Haiti in October 2022, and the subsequent imposition of sanctions on key gang leaders, businessmen and politicians. The UN sanctions have been supplemented by unilateral designations issued by Canada, the US, and the European Union (EU). Further UN sanctions were levied on gang leaders in December 2023, as the preparations accelerated for the MSS deployment.



Intervention by the UN in Haiti is not new, with the embryonic MSS mission representing the third initiative in as many decades. However, the proposed international mission stands out, both for Haiti and more broadly for international responses to organized criminal violence. Historically, the UN has become involved in Haiti in response to political crises, worsening insecurity and repeated natural disasters.<sup>8</sup> While the 2004-2017 United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) engaged in counter-gang operations, largely in and around Port-au-Prince, this came after the force had been on the ground for several years and was generally intermittent.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, the prospective 2024 intervention will be conducted outside the auspices of the UN and has been motivated by, and focuses on, criminal gangs as the main threat to peace and security. This reflects the substantial change in gangs' power, structure and capacity for territorial governance since the MINUSTAH era. These entities are nowadays far more economically autonomous and territorially powerful, making them less controllable. As one Haitian entrepreneur described the contemporary evolution of the gangs: 'We saw a lion being born, we fed it and watched it grow, we tried to domesticate it, but the animal eventually escaped from the cage, and here we are.'<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, the focus by the UNSC on profit-oriented criminal entities as primary conflict actors in their own right, in both the resolutions setting up the sanctions regime and the MSS mission, is a substantial conceptual shift for the UN.<sup>11</sup> Given the growth of transnational organized crime, and expansion of instability and violence linked to such crime, situations like the present one in Haiti are likely to become more common. The UN's current initiatives on Haiti potentially augur a new international approach to how organized crime actors can be tackled both from a security and human rights perspective. Ensuring international tools are effective in mitigating harm caused by gangs in Haiti is therefore vitally important for the people of the country, and for the international community.

The situation presents an extremely difficult test. Haitian armed groups today are more militarily powerful, networked, and resilient than those during the MINUSTAH intervention. It is therefore essential that the various international tools be tailored to the rapidly evolving criminal and violence dynamics on the ground, and be implemented in a strategically coordinated fashion. Meetings between Kenyan and Haitian police teams have taken place, as well as trainings, and vetting processes prior to deployment. However, the proposed mission, the UNSC and the Haitian government have yet to present a public plan and strategy for the intervention, either for short-term engagement on the ground or for a long-term political solution.<sup>12</sup>

This policy report is intended to further efforts to tailor both the MSS mission and the sanctions regime to the current operational challenges in Haiti, support Haitian and international decision-makers in their mission, and provide strategic backing to the country's civil society.

It begins by detailing the current situation on the ground, including gangs and other violent groups' operations, governance and territorial domination. The next section details the mandate and operations of the two primary international tools, the sanctions regime and the MSS mission. The third section flags key issues which need to be considered for both the sanctions regime and the international force, and presents opportunities to align the two more comprehensively, to strengthen public security responses and public policy initiatives so as to resolve the crisis.

This report is the first of several planned publications on the political economy of violence in Haiti and the international cooperation that seeks to uproot it. It follows a 2022 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) report on gang evolution and a 2023 GI-TOC report on gender-based violence in the country.<sup>13</sup>

## Methodology

The methodology for this report is primarily qualitative, combining fieldwork observation and interviews conducted in Haiti in November 2023, and desk research. It is based on 36 interviews with UN officials, Haitian civil society members, public and private sector actors, politicians, police forces, humanitarian actors, diplomats and other locals, and the wider international community. It also draws on UN Security Council resolutions, reports by UN agencies and the Haiti Panel of Experts, and research conducted by think tanks and academics on gang dynamics and instability. Finally, the study also draws on broader research and analysis conducted by the GI-TOC on organized crime in Haiti, UN action against organized crime, and the use of sanctions to address transnational organized crime. All interviews and fieldwork activities were conducted by GI-TOC teams. For security reasons, the names of the interviewees are not given.



# HAITI'S GANGS: FROM TERRITORIAL CONTROL TO CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

**G**angs in Haiti are a longstanding phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> They link to a tradition of non-state armed groups that stretches back to the 1950s, with the development of the Tonton Macoutes by President François (Papa Doc) Duvalier.<sup>15</sup>

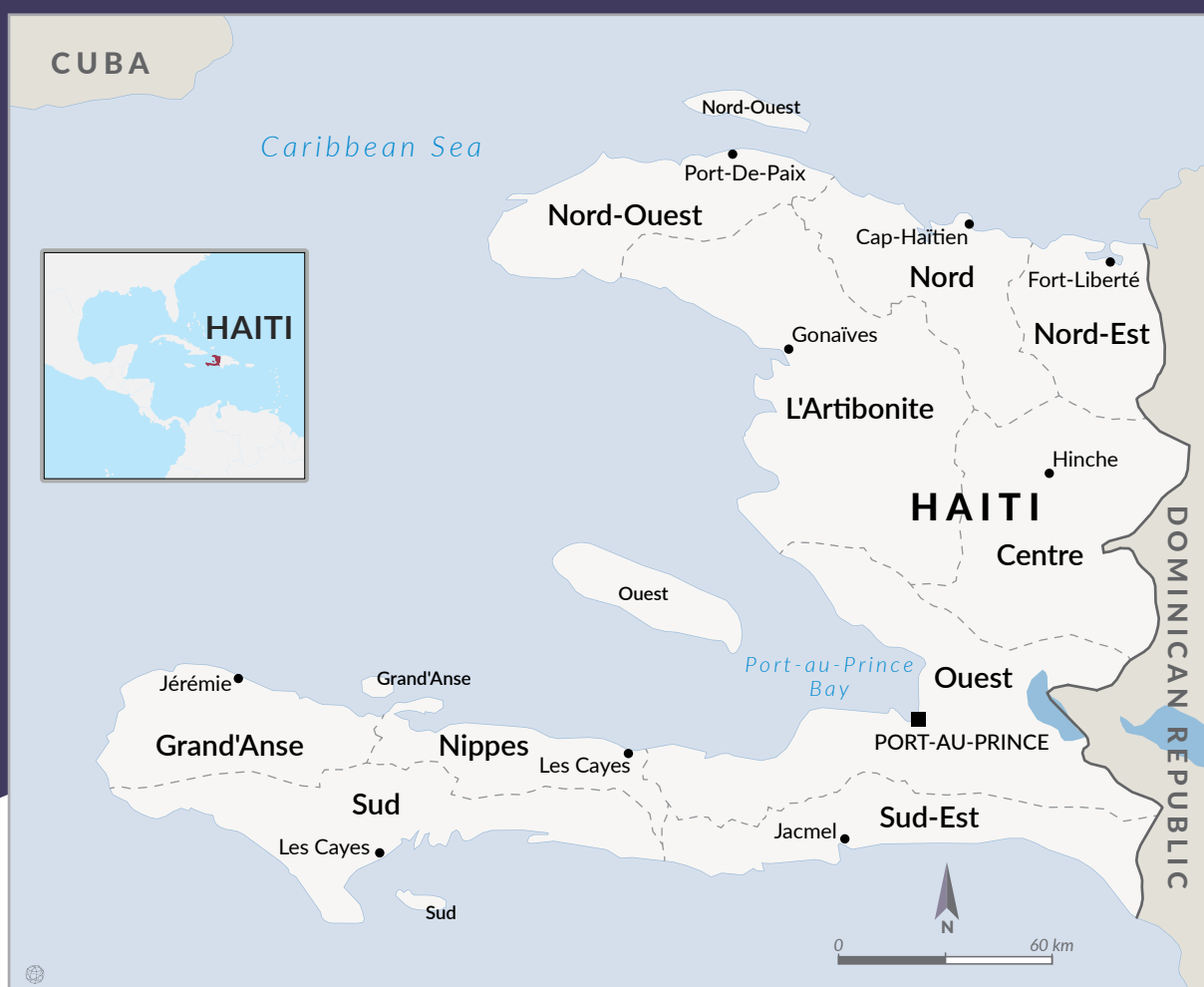
However, the nature of Haiti's gangs has changed drastically in recent years. Writing during the MINUSTAH era, in 2008, analysts flagged that 'Haitian gangs proved to be collections of individuals who formed around brutal and charismatic leaders, unlike the hierarchical, tightly organized turf-based institutions found in the United States.'<sup>16</sup>

This framing of weak, disarticulated gangs is no longer accurate. Although a vast number of Haiti's gangs remain small organizations, the major ones – those which control substantial territory and are responsible for most current instability – are well-structured, well-armed and operationally competent entities.<sup>17</sup> While links to politicians and businesspeople remain, the relationship is more even, with the growing capacity of gangs allowing them to self-fund and put a considerable amount of pressure on the political and economic system.

As a result, the international community and MSS planners confront a very different and, in many ways, far more difficult situation than existed under MINUSTAH. This subsection maps out key ground dynamics, delving first into gang evolution, then gang operations, before finally touching on the formal and informal Haitian actors arrayed against gangs.

## The professionalization of gangs

Gangs have grown significantly in size and diversity in comparison to the 2000s and 2010s. As of early 2024, estimates peg the number of gangs in Haiti at around 200,<sup>18</sup> and they operate mainly in the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince, including the communes of Port-au-Prince, Delmas, Cité Soleil, Tabarre, Carrefour and Pétion-Ville. Their size ranges substantially, from a dozen men to several thousands.



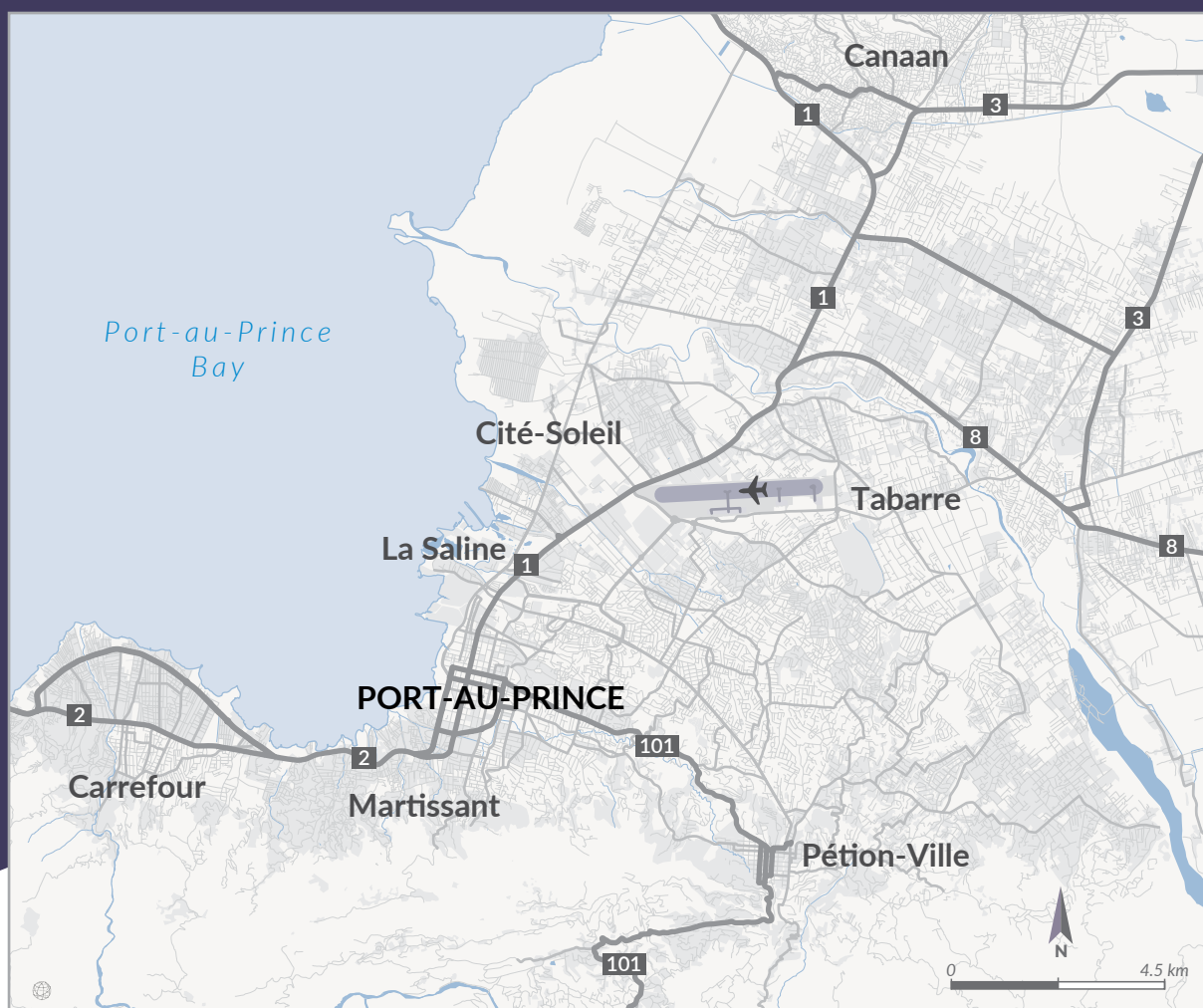
**FIGURE 2** Haiti.

Some gangs that had 50 or 100 active members during the MINUSTAH period now stretch to 1 500 to 2 500 members.<sup>19</sup> The most powerful gangs of today did not even exist a decade ago, while new cliques emerge every week.

Gang leaders are well known in Haiti. These men combine extensive experience as gang members and access to political and economic networks that provide them with patronage and funding, contacts within the police and justice system, and connections capable of trafficking high-calibre weapons or drugs.

In many cases, leaders have served in Haiti's security forces or in political parties or movements. For example, Jimmy Chérizier (aka Barbecue), head of the G9 Fanmi e Alye (G9 Family and Allies or G-9) coalition, is a former police officer, while Chery Christ-Rois (aka Krisla), head of Ti Bwa Gang, is a former political activist.

Increasingly, however, Haiti's gang leaders have begun to emerge via hierarchic advancement within the gangs themselves, either to control established entities or leveraging their experience to found splinter groups. Leaders such as Johnson André (aka Izo or Izo 5 Segond), head of the Village de Dieu – 5 Segond Gang, or Renel Destina (aka Ti Lapli), who leads the Gran Ravine Gang, have been 'gang soldiers' for most of their lives.



**FIGURE 3** Port-au-Prince, showing some urban locations discussed in the report.

These ‘young veterans’, as one interviewee called them, have learned from mistakes made by their former bosses, and thus run much more sophisticated organizations than their predecessors. They resemble – in their ability to administer territories, extract resources, conduct well-designed military-type operations, and organize, deploy and pay hundreds of men – relatively sophisticated drug cartels, militias, or paramilitary groups, rather than the low-capacity gangs that operated in Haiti in the 2000s and early 2010s.

Our contacts indicate that across the board, criminal structures in Haiti are much more hierarchical and strict than before.<sup>20</sup> The larger gangs operate with a leadership team and exploit an organized division of labour – from soldiers to financial officers and political advisors – while maintaining command and control structures in field areas.<sup>21</sup> Further, for large and well-known gangs in Port-au-Prince, recruitment processes have been developed and entail discrete taskings and tests, making it more difficult to join gangs’ ranks, parallel to forced recruitment. Members who have sought to leave gangs, including children, risk being killed.<sup>22</sup>

## Gang control: From urban to rural areas

Historically, gangs in Haiti have been an urban phenomenon, with most operating in and around Port-au-Prince. This broadly remains the case today. At least 23 major gangs operate in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area (West department), clustered around two main coalitions: the G9 and the G-Pèp (G-People) alliance. Alongside these, another seventy smaller and independent gangs undertake opportunistic alliances, both among themselves and with either G9 or G-Pèp.<sup>23</sup> Collectively, the gangs exert control or substantial influence over 80% of the city, as well as the zones immediately outside it. To travel in and out of Port-au-Prince, one must take the risk of driving through a criminal checkpoint; the alternative, for the few who can afford it, is to board a small plane.

A major development in the geography of violence is the rapid expansion of gangs' presence and control in peri-urban and rural areas, a phenomenon that started around 2015. However, it has substantially accelerated over the last two years. While gang members in rural areas are overwhelmingly local to those regions, they are also allied with or connected to large urban structures based in Port-au-Prince. This geographic expansion of major gangs' influence risks triggering the genre of attacks and gender-based violence that were previously largely confined to Port-au-Prince.

The core of Haiti's rural gang challenge is the Artibonite department, which is located roughly 100 kilometres north of the capital (see Figure 2). There, gangs such as Gran Grif and Kokorat San Ras appeared publicly in 2015, allegedly fuelled by candidates in that year's legislative elections who sought to instrumentalize them for political success.<sup>24</sup> Since then, however, the gangs have become more autonomous and increasingly powerful, with Gran Grif (also known as the Savien gang) exponentially enlarging its area of control and influence since 2022.<sup>25</sup> As of 2023, more than 20 criminal structures, including gangs and vigilante groups, operated in the department.<sup>26</sup>

The gangs' expanding presence has led to a sharp increase in violence in Artibonite, including torture, assassinations, extortion, kidnappings for ransom, sexual violence and forced displacement.<sup>27</sup> Between January 2022 and October 2023, more than 1 690 people were killed, injured or kidnapped in the department.<sup>28</sup> In a three-month stretch, the Artibonite accounted for 27% of all victims of killings, injuries and kidnappings throughout Haiti.<sup>29</sup> Violence mainly involved inter-gang competition, including efforts to conquer rivals' territories, rather than being due to expansion into areas previously free of gang control.

| G9 Alliance                                                                                                                                                    | G-Pèp Federation and allies                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Delmas 6 Gang<br>Baz Krache Dife<br>Baz Pilat<br>Nan Ti Bwa<br>Simon Pelé's Gang<br>Baz Nan Chabon<br>Was Jérémie<br>Nan Boston<br>Belekou Gang<br>Chen Méchan | Nan Brooklyn Gang<br>Village de Dieu/5 Segond<br>Fontamara<br>Kraz Baryè<br>400 Marozo<br>Grand Ravine Gang<br>Canaan Gang |

**FIGURE 4** Haiti's main gang alliances.

Violence in the Artibonite also emerged along key roads. Gangs have repeatedly targeted travellers on National Road 1, the main south-north route connecting Port-au-Prince with Gonaïves and Cap-Haïtien, kidnapping at least 515 people in a three month stretch in Artibonite and the neighbouring commune of Croix-des-Bouquets.<sup>30</sup> Incidents of sexual violence and targeted killings have also arisen along the road. Such violence clearly undermines the feasibility of travel between major Haitian cities, potentially posing future risks to commerce and aid delivery should gangs seek to permanently control sections of National Road 1 and other key routes in the Artibonite.

While rural gangs generally engage in a similar range of predatory activities as urban ones – including kidnap for ransom and checkpoint robberies – there has been some specific adaptation to the rural environment. Most notably, gangs in the Artibonite have increasingly invaded farmland, threatened farmers and landowners and demanded payment in return for leaving.<sup>31</sup> This new tactic has driven substantial rural displacement, and impacted agricultural production in Artibonite, with land under cultivation falling from 5 800 hectares in 2018 to 2 400 hectares in 2022.<sup>32</sup> Cultivation likely declined further in 2023. This dynamic has national implications, since Artibonite is key to food supply. Food prices in Port-au-Prince, for example, have sharply increased, while food insecurity, already immense in the country, has continued to worsen.<sup>33</sup>

## **Vigilante uprising in rural Haiti**

The gangs' presence also provoked the growth of existing vigilante groups and the creation of new ones in parts of Artibonite, triggering heightened violence and confrontations between citizens and gangs akin to that prevalent in Port-au-Prince. In September 2023, the deployment of Izo's 5 Second gang members to Mirebalais, 35 kilometres north of the capital, led to clashes between vigilantes and gang members. Thirty were killed, with more than a dozen wounded. At least 800 families in turn fled their homes. Reports indicate several cases where vigilante groups have caught Izo's soldiers and lynched them or burned them alive.<sup>34</sup>

The territorial expansion of the Village de Dieu Gang and the G-Pèp coalition has also fed into new forms of violence, along with these groups' capacities to move armed men by sea, across the bay of Port-au-Prince, to avoid territories controlled by their enemy G9. Moreover, the ability of Village de Dieu to operate at sea poses a major and unaddressed tactical challenge to the international intervention, which is envisaged as operating largely inland, within the capital. Finally, the 'ruralization' of violence does not only concern gangs' direct presence. Sources in southern departments have indicated that some local schools have been saturated by children sent by their families from Port-au-Prince to study away from the capital, amid the relative calm that was still found in this part of the country until recently.

## **Gang alliances: Franchises at the service of territorial expansion**

A key facet of Haitian gangs' evolution has been the emergence of rival blocs, notably G9 and G-Pèp. G9 formed first, through the work of Jimmy Chérizier; it is an alliance of nine gangs allegedly linked to the Haitian Tèt Kale Party. G-Pèp was then created by Ti Gabriel, of the Nan Brooklyn Gang, largely in reaction.<sup>35</sup> These two blocs include major gangs which are formally linked, medium-sized gangs which are looser affiliates of either of the blocs, and smaller gangs and independent actors who engage opportunistically. It is important to stress that gang alliances remain loose, with tensions and occasional clashes occurring within alliance blocs, as well as against external adversaries. Moreover,

**Burnt-out car next to the remains of a barricade in Delmas, Port-au-Prince, November 2023. Photo: Romain Le Cour Grandmaison/GI-TOC**



rivalries between gang leaders do not prevent them from exchanging on WhatsApp groups, according to our interlocutors.

The gang alliance system was mainly a dynamic of Port-au-Prince. However, there are some indications – as underscored by Izo's move into Artibonite – that the capital's gangs are looking to develop similar alliance structures nationally.<sup>36</sup>

For the gangs, the development of alliances is a fluid phenomenon that serves several purposes.

First, in operational terms, the development of alliances reflects the extreme territorialization of gangs, who tend to be rooted in specific neighbourhoods or areas, some of which are small areas. Although their localized roots constitute a strength, constant confrontations and their endless list of enemies prevent most groups from readily operating outside their turf. A gang leader, for example, would generally not risk leaving his stronghold for fear of being targeted by a rival or by the police. As a result, only the most powerful gangs – such as Izo's or Chérizier's – are usually able to operate or profiteer outside their fiefdoms.

This is when alliances come into play. When gangs go to war, seek to expand their territory or to protect themselves from rivals' attacks, alliances enable the provision or receipt of quick support, with allied gangs dispatching 'soldiers'. This was the case during peaks of violence in Carrefour and Mariani, for example, or after the death of Iscard Andrice (Iskar), a prominent G9 leader in November 2023, in Cité-Soleil. Here, at least 166 people were killed in brutal confrontations that lasted for three days, while more than 1 000 were displaced, with local sources reporting that armed reinforcements were mobilized by rival gangs over the course of a week.<sup>37</sup>

Second, the creation of public alliances feeds an image of power for the gangs and a dynamic of 'branding' that fuels the creation of new small groups. It is not just a question of clashes between groups, but also of who has the upper hand, G9 or G-Pèp. According to several interviewees who have direct access to the gangs, the alliances function as 'brands' that new (often small) groups seek to join, both to receive the potential protection of the 'gang families' and to establish their own reputation. Being

able to announce that one is affiliated with G9 or G-Pèp enables the newly created group to raise its profile and its attractiveness to potential recruits.

In this way, the 'blocs' created by G9 and G-Pèp are a powerful communication, recruitment and expansion tool, enabling them to extend their influence by supporting and integrating new cells. This creates a political dynamic, making the expansion of influence by gang leaders far easier than in the past, with territorial conquest giving way to expansion through franchising.

## Firearms proliferation and tactical training: The new reality

Present-day gangs enjoy a much higher degree of military capacity than those a decade ago, which is reflected in the increasing violence seen in Port-au-Prince, the Artibonite and the south. This has largely been driven by gangs' ability to acquire high-calibre weapons.

Over the past decade, firearms have completely transformed the ecosystem of violence. Ten years ago, according to interviews, it was rare to find semi-automatic weapons in the hands of street soldiers, who in some cases were forced to share handguns between several members. Weapons availability was limited enough that provision of guns was a key form of support by elites to gangs, creating a degree of dependency and control.

This has changed, as a variety of weapons trafficking networks – allegedly tied to US, Jamaican, Dominican and Haitian intermediaries, and corrupt authorities and military personnel – have emerged to drive a robust black market in trafficked firearms.<sup>38</sup> Larger gangs are readily able to acquire AK-47, AR-15 or IMI Galil assault rifles, with local sources suggesting they have stockpiled them.<sup>39</sup> Information from different gang-controlled areas also suggests the presence of .50 calibre rifles and tripod-mounted weapons, while there are rumours of the acquisition of M50 and M60 assault rifles.

The increasing availability of weapons has spurred recruitment, in the shape of gangs reportedly promising prospective recruits a personal weapon. Finally, local sources have explained how gang members sometimes ask victims of their extortion rackets, especially companies that operate within their territory, to pay them in ammunition or firearms, rather than cash.



A sign reading 'firearms are prohibited' at the entrance to a hotel in Pétiion-Ville, Port-au-Prince, November 2023. Photo: Romain Le Cour Grandmaison / GI-TOC

## **Gangs' tactical improvements build on weapons acquisition**

The operational capacity of gangs has also been buttressed by tactical training. Ex-soldiers and policemen have been recruited both as fighters and trainers, transforming the ability of gangs to operate. The most powerful gangs now 'move and fight differently' to five years ago, one source said. 'You can tell from the way they carry their rifles, they know how to use them, some are well-trained ... [and they display] intimate knowledge of their territories, streets, houses.'<sup>40</sup>

This increased operational capability has shifted how gangs operate. They are capable of and willing to confront police (including special tactics squads), leading to a growing trend of direct assaults on stations and outposts.<sup>41</sup> Recent gang offensives have also involved the use of counterfeit police uniforms and high-calibre weapons capable of destroying armoured vehicles.<sup>42</sup>

The gangs have also shifted how they secure their territory, hedging more against incursions by heavily armed rivals and the police. Ahead of the potential deployment of the international force, sources contacts indicate that major gangs are stepping up operations to gather information and intelligence.

Overall, gangs' rising capacity – including the proliferation of firearms and development of tactical training – is transforming the nature of confrontations, making them ever more violent. The armed groups can confront the police (and will be able to confront MSS forces) in a way they did not during the MINUSTAH era. However, this does not mean that all gangs hold the same capacity of sustained confrontation. Several interviewees pointed out that in contrast to the generally high capability outlined above, some gangs have difficulty paying, feeding, and arming their soldiers. This fragility, in turn, could mean that the application of heightened strategic pressure by the international mission and HNP could collapse those gangs' capabilities more rapidly and to a greater degree than commonly perceived.

Moreover, several sources close to gang leaders told us that most of the groups were not ready to go into battle against the MSS mission, seeing the international deployment as too powerful a rival, which whom it would be smarter to negotiate rather than fight. However, while this evaluation is also fairly prevalent within international civil society, caution should abound, especially given the determination shown by gangs in their battles against the HNP.

## **Gangs, vigilantes and strongmen: The new ecosystem of violence**

While the behaviour of Haiti's gangs is the most visible manifestation of violence, these entities are nevertheless part of a broader violent ecosystem that is continually expanding.

### **Smaller gangs, deportees and freelancers**

The vast majority of the 200 cells operating in the country are cliques of dozens of men, much less well armed than the major gangs and in some cases unable to pay regular wages to their members. These groups are looking to become bigger, usually under the protection of a major gang, and they are often assigned specific tasks – checkpoint surveillance or kidnappings, for example – in the service of the latter.

There are also several 'freelance' gangs and groups of individuals that specialize in highly valued skills or services. These include gangs composed of ex-police officers, including from special tactics units, as well as military or security trained personnel. They can provide armed support to both alliances –

G9 and G-Pèp – during conflicts, as well as personnel able to operate heavier weapons, offer sharper shooting skills, and aid in the design of tactically complex operations. One example is the Galil Gang, a group which delivers strategic support to other gangs. Present in several Caribbean countries, Galil also provides ‘counsel’ to violent partners, according to interviewees, working as intermediaries to help gain access to specific, hard to penetrate markets, for example specific firearms such as M-4 machine guns or Negev light machine guns.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, one specific category has gained crucial importance in Haiti’s criminal ecosystem in the past years: the ‘deportees’, gang members and criminals that had been arrested, jailed, and then deported from the United States. Because they bring expertise in the use of firearms, possible contacts in the US and Latin America for drug and weapons trafficking, and experience in bigger gangs or criminal structures, these individuals are extremely valuable for Haitian criminals. Carefully recruited and allegedly better paid than locals, these men work alongside ex-police or military trained personnel in providing tactical training to young gang members, for example.

## **Bwa Kale**

In the spring of 2023, a major transformation of violence occurred in Port-au-Prince, with the development of a vigilante movement called ‘Bwa Kale’ (peeled wood), mobilizing several hundreds of individuals at key moments of uprising.

At the core of Bwa Kale lies the citizens’ will to restore order and security, take justice into their own hands, and punish enemies – gang members or not – through physical violence. The latter includes public lynching and executions, of which more than 600 cases have been registered since April 2023, according to local sources.

Although most media outlets have portrayed Bwa Kale as a momentary, spectacular outburst of citizens’ anger against gangs’ harassment and the government’s inability to provide security, this arguably represents only part of the picture. Rather than a proper organization or group, Bwa Kale might be best understood as a renewed set of old practices of community surveillance and patrolling that intersect with neighbourhood ‘brigades’ and ‘baz’ (bases).

These terms both refer to a modality in which citizens have organized within their communities – usually in contact with state authorities and police forces – via small informal or formal structures, with fluctuating levels of sophistication, focusing on public security, social and religious activities, political rallying, and electoral tasks.<sup>44</sup> In Port-au-Prince, dozens of brigades and baz currently operate with strongmen, or a group of them, at their head. These men act as community leaders and crucial brokers, serving as the interface between neighbourhoods and public or private stakeholders.

Bwa Kale can also be understood as a fluid ‘mob’ response that can be activated in specific circumstances, such as gang attacks. People can be heard saying that they’re going to ‘make a Bwa Kale’, for example. In addition, ‘Bwa Kale’ graffiti have appeared in dozens of neighbourhoods around the capital.<sup>45</sup> Any group of citizens can act under the auspices of Bwa Kale, claiming its right to punish and discipline. This is why lynching have repeatedly been committed over the last year, besides the April and May ‘Bwa Kale moment’ of uprising.

Bwa Kale is usually mobilized on a very small territorial scale, operating on a neighbourhood basis. Delimiting the perimeter of action of the vigilantes, through the installation of checkpoints, for example, serves to socially and territorially divide the interior from the exterior; what is safe from what is a

menace, while vigilante practices include patrolling – people are armed with sticks, stones, machetes or, increasingly, different types of firearms. Whenever the vigilantes identify a threat, it takes only a few minutes to mobilize the population – mainly through WhatsApp groups or even more spontaneous street alerts – to close the doors or the checkpoints, chase down the threat and, in many cases, summarily punish the suspect.

Finally, because of its popularity within the Port-au-Prince population, Bwa Kale has re-sparked the creation of neighbourhood brigades, and the installation of barricades, massive metal doors, and barriers at the entrances to dozens of areas of the capital. These are guarded, or at least monitored day and night. In certain areas, the brigades went as far as to build concrete surveillance outposts. Moreover, Bwa Kale movements have also spread out in Port-au-Prince, for example in the Artibonite department.

Without going into the complex history of these vigilante movements here, several local groups have gained substantial power through the provision of security in their area. This is the case around the Port-au-Prince sectors of Laboule 12, Thomassin, Duplan 2 and Fort Jacques, above Pétion-Ville, where different sources said that local vigilante groups played a crucial role in evicting Carlo Petit-Homme's (aka Ti Makak) gang, in April of 2023, and bringing order to the area.<sup>46</sup>

There are also historic precedents, however, for vigilantes converting their social power into political and violent capital, in so doing transforming into criminal gangs. Baz Pilat for example, active around Carrefour Feuilles, in the south of the capital, has become a major gang-vigilante structure. Its alleged leader, Ezéchiél Alexandre, a former divisional inspector in the HNP, was arrested in June 2022. The gang remains central to ongoing violence in the area.

## **Vigilante movements and their relationships with the police**

It is important to underscore that in Baz, brigades, Bwa Kale, and other manifestations of vigilantism, the nature of the activities is intimately linked to police forces, both institutionally or personally.

In vigilante movements, taking justice into one's hands is presented as a moral imperative: when the government is not doing its job to combat criminal groups, people must act and protect their communities. In that sense, the vigilantes seek to fulfil the role that the state fails to play in protecting them from violence, while still calling upon the government to support them politically, financially, and militarily. This is the paradox of self-defence groups, in Haiti and elsewhere: usually professing to emanate from a tradition of self-help, vigilantes at the same time seek to satisfy community demands for more state presence, public accountability and greater police intervention.<sup>47</sup>

Vigilantes' tactics for controlling territory enables them to cooperate with the police, particularly to hunt down gang members, while by securing their turf, leaders earn legitimacy in the eyes of local inhabitants. In return, by collaborating with these movements, public authorities and police forces can increase their local acceptance, gather intelligence on the local dynamics of violence, develop a network of allied strongmen, or, at least, guarantee a presence through a proxy partner.

The vigilante structures tend to include police officers who support, tolerate and/or participate in the movements, usually on an informal basis. According to our interviewees, this is first linked to an individual logic: police officers live in the same neighbourhoods where vigilante groups operate, which makes them both exposed and involved, as citizens as well as police officers, in community protection. A policeman can therefore perform its public duty, in uniform, during one part of the day, before becoming a vigilante, dressed as a civilian, during another.

Secondly, the provision of security by vigilante groups, which is central to vigilantism well beyond Haiti, is rapidly becoming a supplementary task for public forces.<sup>48</sup> The latter can delegate surveillance of the territory to these groups, collaborate with them discreetly and informally, and establish links between the vigilantes and the police institution. At one surveillance outpost that we visited, the armed vigilantes were standing a few meters from the neighbourhood police station, illustrating the tacit cohabitation between them.

For public authorities, tolerating vigilante movements, or even establishing formal agreements with them might appear efficient in the short term – for example, if it contributes to improving the territorial foothold of the HNP or of the MSS mission. However, in the long run, it tends to further de-legitimize the state as the sole guarantor of order and security, posing threats to political stabilization and violence reduction. Moreover, while gang activities and violent crimes are a strong driver for the creation of vigilante groups, it is not uncommon for them to gradually become more involved in illicit activities, especially extortion-rackets, and different forms of trafficking, while their leaders tend to accumulate more and more personal power.

### **Avengers, strongmen or political leaders? The new rebels and their militias**

A final group of actors deserves crucial attention. It concerns strongmen who straddle the line between vigilante leaders and political bosses, accumulating considerable power and articulating it with open calls for popular rebellion against the government of Ariel Henry.

In the western and southern communes of Nippes, Aquin and Les Cayes, Jean-Ernest Muscadin, Commissioner of Miragoâne, has been leading for more than two years a large vigilante-style group that he presents as an organ of moral justice and stronger public security in the absence of the state.<sup>49</sup> His men, often equipped with automatic weapons, partly regulate life in the municipalities where they operate, in addition to eliminating the gang members they track down, including in disputed territories outside Muscadin's jurisdiction. The Ministry of Justice reportedly blamed the commissioner for extending its mandate in December 2023.<sup>50</sup> According to interviews conducted for this study, Muscadin enjoys considerable popularity, both with the population living in these three communes and within the diaspora in the United States. His ability to maintain order, despite videos allegedly showing him executing suspected gang members in broad daylight, has turned him into a key figure in local security and a potential political player to be reckoned with at the national level, although several human rights organizations have called for his impeachment.<sup>51</sup>

In recent weeks, an even more important figure has reappeared on the Haitian political scene: Guy Philippe. Philippe was police chief in Cap Haïtien during the 1990s, before he was accused of planning a coup against former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. He was dismissed in 2000, and fled to the Dominican Republic.<sup>52</sup> Having received special forces training from the US during his police career, he helped to set up a paramilitary group, the Front Pour la Libération et la Reconstruction Nationales (Front for National Liberation and Reconstruction), aimed at overthrowing the Aristide government.<sup>53</sup> That government was toppled in 2004, allegedly with the support of personnel still loyal to Philippe.<sup>54</sup> Despite being elected senator, he was arrested and extradited to the United States in January 2017.<sup>55</sup> Charged with money laundering and drug trafficking, he spent six years in prison. Philippe was finally released and deported to Haiti in December 2023.<sup>56</sup>

In the first weeks of 2024, Philippe has rekindled his profile by organizing several demonstrations across the country, including the capital, the border area with the Dominican Republic and the far west, in Jérémie. These events, held in departments several hundred kilometres apart, underscore

his continued capacity for mobilization. Philippe has released a video in which he urges a 'revolution' and 'civil disobedience' to free Haiti.<sup>57</sup>

Several of Philippe's demonstrations were protected by heavily armed men in uniform or plain clothes, many of them members of the Brigade de Sécurité des Aires Protégées (Protected Areas Security Brigade, BSAP). Created in 2006 and falling under the authority of the Ministry of Environment, the BSAP is supposedly tasked with the management of protected environmental areas and ecological sites in Haiti. However, sources have told Haitian media that the government is not able to confirm how many BSAP members are officially registered – our sources range from 2 000 to 6 000 – nor to assess how they are paid and armed.<sup>58</sup> Contacts were also unable to detail how agents are currently being recruited, trained or paid.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, the force clearly has a degree of capacity, with the men appearing with Philippe over the past weeks carrying military gear, and semi-automatic rifles.<sup>60</sup>

The mobilization of the BSAP, the inability of Haitian politicians to say who controls it, and the connections to Philippe are all troubling. They point to a risk that the BSAP could be shifting towards a hybrid-type group – nominally part of the government, but largely operating outside of the control of public officials. The mobilizing power of Guy Philippe, who is said to have been joined in his movement by Commissaire Muscadin, seems particularly strong. Clashes, street closures and occupation of public institutions have been reported, including in the capital, since 12 January 2024.

The profile of these men has been greatly underestimated by analyses to date. Capable of conducting political activities with the support of armed militias, including governmental ones, they pose a major challenge to the weakened authority of the Haitian government, and a different type of challenge than the gangs to the prospective MSS mission and the international community.

## **The new logics of territorial control and rent extraction**

As the operational capacity and territorial reach of Haiti's gangs and gang alliances has grown, their approach to governance has also deepened in important ways, with implications for social and territorial control, as well as profit generation.

### **Gang entrenchment**

Because Port-au-Prince and Artibonite are home to hundreds of bosses that act like local sovereigns, the logics of territorial control, street by street, district by district, road by road, create a fragmented geography that is in constant evolution and will pose crucial challenges to the MSS mission.

Control over the main roads across and outside the capital (the RN1, RN8, RN3 and the 101) has been one of the most strategic goals and a constant source of clashes, especially since autumn 2023. The same logic applies to the road network in and around Carrefour-Feuilles and Mariani. Roads serve as physical divides between criminal territories, as well as indispensable axes for drug trafficking, kidnapping and extortion. The roads that cross Port-au-Prince from north to south-west, amounting to just over 45 kilometres in total, are controlled by dozens of different gangs, divided into small sections over which each group regulates movements, imposes extortion and exerts constant surveillance. The same dynamic has expanded into Artibonite.

Within the gangs' fiefdoms, the objective of control is slightly different. The aim is not only to monitor movement, but also to prevent people entering or exiting their zone. In recent years, gangs have emptied entire areas that separate their territory from that of a rival group, displacing populations

and razing houses to establish and maintain buffer zones and no man's land. Similarly, gangs build trenches and high walls to protect fiefdoms against 'invasions' and, more recently, from sniper fire. These defences are also intended to protect them from police operations and, potentially, MSS forces.

Life in the worst gang-controlled areas amounts to living in an urban war zone, where constant stress and anxiety causes deep psychological trauma. Living conditions are at times near apocalyptic. In Cité Soleil, for example, some neighbourhoods contend with garbage immersed in up to a metre of stagnant water, with no access to even the most basic hygiene facilities. The restrictions on movement imposed by gangs mean these zones are becoming open air prisons that only gang-members or local inhabitants can even begin to navigate.

In recent months, this mosaic of fiefdoms and fortresses has continued to evolve, shaped by the expansion of gangs, as well as the development of vigilante groups and brigades created to fight them. The result is a tendency for territories to become more and more entrenched. The intensifying fragmentation of territory, proliferation of trenches and semi-permanent barriers, and the difficulty in moving freely in the metropolitan area represent clear operational constraints for the proposed international force, to the point where it risks being unable to traverse the capital.

## **Extreme violence at the service of criminal governance**

While there are variations in the social and territorial control practices of different groups, common dynamics emerge. For example, closed turf reinforce the mutual surveillance of residents. As a result, it is virtually impossible to enter a neighbourhood without being seen and identified either as a 'local' or a 'foreigner.' Some gangs are characterized by much stricter and violent social control than others. In certain zones, residents are forbidden from leaving the area, a measure that is even more strictly enforced during bouts of armed confrontation with other gangs.

In these cases, gangs might only allow women and children to depart (at their own risk). Moreover, local sources have reported that gang members posted at some checkpoints routinely demand residents show them their cell phones, to monitor conversations and to check their photos and videos. Gangsters try to find out whether residents are transmitting information about the neighbourhood and the gang to outsiders. If so, they face punishment.

Extreme violence, including the display of corpses in the street and other serious human rights violations, have become near-daily occurrences in gang-controlled areas. Residents live in constant fear. Sexual violence against women and girls, for example, works as a central practice of gang control. According to interviewees that live in gang-controlled areas or interact daily with leaders, some gangs have authorized their soldiers to carry out mass rapes, an instrument of terror that also serves to discipline populations. In certain cases, rapes are committed in public, in front of large groups of civilians, or even the victims' families. For women and girls living in controlled areas, the threat of rape permeates every moment. Buffer zones between territories are particularly exposed, leaving the way open for a group to assault women by abducting them on their way to work, for example.

Accounts of atrocities in Port-au-Prince, some of which cite sexual slavery, involving repeated rapes and torture over a period of weeks, underline the systemic aspect of sexual violence, and the challenge that lies ahead for rebuilding social fabric, supporting victims and pacifying the city. In general, territorial fragmentation and severe social control imposed by violent groups adds to the city's complex geography, generating an atmosphere of incessant pressure, risk and fear. All these aspects must feed into any appraisal of the prospective MSS mission's capacity to operate meaningfully on the ground, in terms of its ability to provide effective security and protection to the population.



Graffiti referencing the G-9 Gang Alliance, Port-au-Prince, November 2023.

*Photo: Romain Le Cour Grandmaison/GI-TOC*

## Extortion and protection rackets: Bureaucratization of crime

The social control exerted by gangs is primarily geared towards maximizing access to resources, both financial and political, licit and illicit. Contrary to what their leaders might tell the media, most gangs no longer aim to rekindle the hope of living together, but rather to maximize the opportunities offered by their territorial control.

The first source of revenue lies in protection rackets and other forms of extortion. In the most obvious of examples, the gangs impose taxation in return for protection of business activities. This is particularly true for G9 groups. The control they exert on the capital's ports and oil terminals, and the Delmas area, where commercial activities, warehouses, markets and corporate headquarters are located, has allowed them to extract considerable revenue from private companies. One prominent businessman who maintains interests in the port said:

Every container, every landing is gang-controlled. From the ship to the landing, then the transport, then the storage warehouse, right through to the exit, everything is in the hands of the gangs, before passing under police protection. But sometimes the gangs are more efficient and cheaper than the police, because of course you have to pay the police, on the side, to get good service. When you have a business in Haiti, you're used to paying for everything, any kind of security or protection, we've been living for decades in a checkpoint society, privatizing public force, you pay the police for anything and everything, that's how it works here, and I'm not sure the international force can do anything about it.<sup>61</sup>

Local sources say that these protection rackets are managed through well-known brokers who organize the negotiations and payments between gangs and the private sector. In some cases, business operations are said to be paying from US\$5 000 to US\$20 000 per week for the right to operate, as well as a percentage fee on every container coming off the ships. Finally, locals have reported that the gangs sometimes ask the brokers to arrange weapons and ammunition deliveries, instead of cash payments.

## The business of checkpoints, the industry of kidnapping

Checkpoints represent the second key avenue for rent extraction. Scores of them are installed throughout the metropolitan area. The checkpoints and the rackets attached to them have evolved into a highly

structured and bureaucratized activity. At the most sophisticated ones, transporters who move goods or people, and who pass checkpoints daily, can ask for a card to pay extortion once a week, instead of being delayed day upon day. The chauffeur must present himself to a 'tutor' who works from a dedicated office, not far from the checkpoints. According to interviewees, the toughest checkpoints are located at the entrance and exit points of Port-au-Prince (on the road to Artibonite), in Canaan, and in Martissant (in the southwest province). According to interviews, and BINUH reports, some checkpoints are reported to collect millions of Haitian Gourdes per day (between US\$ 6 000 and 8 000, depending on the source).<sup>62</sup> Although bureaucratization offers a degree of certainty for commuters and transporters, journeys remain extremely dangerous, exposing residents to threats, physical violence, theft and kidnappings.

The latter has emerged as one of the most important criminal markets in and around the capital. Whether wealthy or poor, virtually everybody in Port-au-Prince knows at least one person who has been kidnapped over the past two years. According to the Center for Analysis and Research on Human Rights (CARDH), 857 abductions were recorded in 2022, compared with 1 009 in 2021 (a decrease of 15.1%); however, in 2023, the third quarter of the year alone saw 362 reports of kidnappings, an increase of 141.3% compared to the second quarter.<sup>63</sup> The CARDH acknowledges that these figures underestimate the true extent of the problem, due to the fear of reporting and the lack of judicial support in dealing with kidnappings. Drawing on anecdotal evidence, contacts estimate that the true number could be 50 times higher, especially if one considers the rise of 'collective kidnappings', involving the abduction of entire busloads of passengers, for example.<sup>64</sup>

Kidnapping has become an 'industry' generating millions of dollars per year.<sup>65</sup> Besides the permanent threat that kidnappings create for the people of Port-au-Prince, the activity has a crucial link with the gangs' territorial control. Not only do the strongest groups need to maintain dozens of people in captivity, and therefore to control safe houses, they also crucially need operators – internal or external to the gangs – to carry out abductions, and to transport the victims to them.

When kidnappings occur on the main gangs' turf, or within the vicinity, transport is easier. However, the need to extract bigger rents has led gangs to abduct people far from their territories, including in wealthier areas. In this case, the group responsible for the kidnapping must pay subcontractors that are in control of the routes used to transport the victim, through to the destination. In some cases, released victims recalled being transported by groups, each tasked with a specific role and geographic segment of transfer, prior to the abductees being handed over to the principal gang. The will to cut these overheads feeds into gangs competing to achieve monopolistic control over the roads.

Secretly renting portions of their roads also allows certain groups to publicly distance themselves from kidnappings, considered a deeply unpopular activity. The arrangement sees them receive a toll for each abducted person, while they still can point the authorship of the abduction to another group. Yet, these deals tend to provoke more and more disputes and clashes between gangs, including in Carrefour-Feuilles this year. They also spark violent vigilante reactions from locals against kidnappers. The returns on offer from the kidnapping business, the deadly competition surrounding it and the need to control strategic routes, make it akin to the trade in narcotics.

Finally, several local sources have indicated that certain gangs have recently turned to organ trafficking, especially in Cité Soleil and Canaan. Although this topic needs further investigation, witnesses during this study cited cases of corpses missing vital organs and left on the streets – both in Port-au-Prince and in rural areas where gangs have attacked and kidnapped people. Finally, local sources within hospitals have confirmed some such cases, adding that some gangs now also operate their own clinics, not only to treat their soldiers, but also to extract organs from abductees.

## Police (in)capacity: An institution in distress

A final key element which has a direct bearing on the success or failure of international efforts to counter Haiti's gangs is the HNP's institutional weakness. On paper, at a national level, the force numbers 13 816 officers.<sup>66</sup> While not as low as in the early 2000s and 2010s, the force strength nonetheless remains critically small.<sup>67</sup> In practice, the number of personnel available for active patrolling is around 3 300, less than a quarter of the overall force.<sup>68</sup>

HNP personnel gaps have been further exacerbated by gang attacks. This has in part involved direct assaults on on-duty and off-duty officers, killing more than 40 and wounding 55 between January and September 2023.<sup>69</sup> In one case, a special tactics unit was ambushed, with several officers killed amid calls for backup. Further, gangs have become increasingly willing to attack and at times storm police posts and stations, causing serious damage, destroying the posts or driving the HNP to abandon them.<sup>70</sup>

Gangs' coercion of police has also increased. According to police sources, between 2022 and 2023, dozens of officers were forced to leave their homes because of direct threats and violence directed against them by both gangs and vigilante groups. Others regularly choose not to wear their uniforms or go to work due to threats. Contacts within the force say that over 900 officers fled the country during 2023, often through humanitarian migration programmes set up by the US or Canada, while the police academy has just resumed training new recruits, after more than a year of paralysis. Moreover, our interviewees decried the lack of financial resources allocated by authorities, and delayed or completely unpaid salaries. They also pointed to the absence of social security and protection mechanisms for officers and their families, in the event of injury or death. Police stations, like other security and penal institutions, are generally dilapidated, having received almost no recent support.

Meanwhile, the Haitian Coast Guard reportedly operates with less than 200 officers, and only one functioning vessel. As a result, patrolling to counter the import of weapons and other contraband, or to prevent the maritime movements of gangs, particularly in the bay of Port-au-Prince, is virtually non-existent. This constraint will be significant for the prospective MSS mission, itself conceived only as a land-based mission.<sup>71</sup>

The same dynamic exists on borders; these are likewise barely controlled, with the HNP units relatively small and challenged by limited transportation. As a result, clandestine crossings between the Dominican Republic and Haiti are common, with some sources flagging the existence of over 70 informal border crossings, compared with nine official ones.

The institutional fragility of the police is also reflected in the accusations of corruption and extra-legal violence that are rife in discussions in Haiti. When asked about collusion between gangs and the HNP, one officer said that the phenomenon is 'obvious' – 'you see gangsters arrested and immediately released ... Or you set up an operation, launch it, and realize that the gang had received all the confidential information about it. How can we work like this? How can we guarantee information security? You can't trust your colleague.'<sup>72</sup>

Several sources close to the police also reported deep internal conflicts within the force, notably due to established or presumed complicities between some officers and armed groups or vigilante groups. This dynamic will prove particularly crucial when it comes to coordination between the MSS mission and the HNP. Maintaining confidentiality in such an institutional context and with little or no police control will prove difficult, although our interlocutors claimed that the remaining police officers are prepared to do anything to regain some prestige and respect.



## THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO GANGS IN HAITI

**F**acing the deteriorating situation in Haiti, the UN Security Council has slowly and steadily increased its focus on the country and provided authorization for international efforts to stabilize the situation, through resolutions for both a sanctions regime and the MSS mission.

The UNSC was briefed on a rapidly worsening humanitarian situation, largely driven by the actions of criminal gangs, including through the targeting of civilians, gender-based violence and blockades on critical infrastructure. Haiti's stalled political transition was also a key element of discussion, as well as popular unrest and rioting linked to government subsidy removal.

At the time, Ariel Henry, Haiti's prime minister, urged the international community to pay attention to the risks of a humanitarian crisis driven by dwindling supplies of water, fuel and basic goods, and characterized also by a resurgence of cholera.<sup>73</sup> He further requested the deployment of a specialized international force and technical assistance for the HNP to address gang violence.<sup>74</sup>

In response, two resolutions were presented by the US and Mexico to the UNSC on 17 October 2022.<sup>75</sup> The first resolution was for the creation of a sanctions regime, while the second authorized the deployment of a non-UN international security force. On 21 October, the sanctions resolution was passed, while the second resolution was paused, only to be revived and passed on 2 October 2023, authorizing the MSS mission.

The UNSC's actions on Haiti are largely in line with responses by the international community to peace and security challenges in the post Cold War era. These have typically hinged on targeted sanctions and/or a peace keeping mission.

This broad similarity, however, masks an international effort which is relatively novel and potentially trend setting in several areas. First, the focus of the mission is on gangs, criminal actors whose underlying interest is financial profiteering, rather an effort to seize political control. This stands in contrast to most previous UN missions, which have sought to intercede in situations in which armed actors are motivated ostensibly by political goals, even if key leaders or fighters simultaneously engage in economic profiteering and predation. Historically, the UNSC has been relatively loath to engage in

direct action on criminal issues, in part because of opposition by the five permanent members of the council which see organized crime as a domestic issue to be resolved accordingly.

The UNSC's overall support for sanctions and intervention in Haiti then is notable, likely reflecting the very real concerns that if the situation is unaddressed it could result in organized crime groups causing state collapse.<sup>76</sup> It could also be portentous, both given the precedent it offers for action against criminals and, more pressingly, the likelihood that the rising power of organized crime groups globally could result in more dire situations akin to that in Haiti.

The second novel facet of the UNSC's response is authorization of a non-UN security force for the intervention. UN authorized multinational forces have been used in a handful of instances since the 1990s, including during the intervention in Haiti in 1993 and in 2004. However, in most cases multinational force interventions have been relatively short and have been then supplanted by UN-led peacekeeping missions. However, there have been exceptions to this rule, most prominently the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. The multinational force for Haiti, if it goes ahead, may be another exception.

It is likely that non-UN multinational deployments will become more common. In part this is due to the setbacks faced by large UN peacekeeping operations, notably in Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which have fuelled calls for new approaches.<sup>77</sup> These calls have been reflected in the UN Secretary General's 'New Agenda for Peace' briefing paper, which calls for a new model of peace enforcement more geared towards international authorization and financing of interventions by regional bodies.<sup>78</sup>



Road in Tabarre, Port-au-Prince,  
November 2023. Photo: Romain  
Le Cour Grandmaison/GI-TOC

Due both to the focus of the sanctions regime and the nature of the prospective MSS mission, the results in Haiti are likely to be closely watched for evidence of success and failure, with either outcome likely resulting in further knock-on effects.

The novelty of the approach, however, also creates opportunities for a new model of engagement and interaction to be developed between the Sanctions Committee on Haiti and the MSS force. Such engagement is arguably both needed and eminently feasible, with potentially substantial benefits for the broader efforts by the international community to assist Haiti and Haitians.

This section first details the structure and focus of the two main intervention tools: the sanctions regime and the MSS mission. It then details key points for consideration in the coordination of the two initiatives, and ways in which both could be better tailored to address the realities of the criminal ecosystem menacing peace and security in Haiti.

## **Sanctions: Developing the regime to buttress the deployment**

Since the end of the Cold War, targeted financial and travel sanctions have emerged as a primary instrument used by the UN when threats to peace and security emerge. They have accompanied most UN peacekeeping missions, or occasionally served as a standalone response.<sup>79</sup>

Traditionally, they have primarily been directed at political actors – including government officials and armed group leaders – or those politically or financially supporting criminal actors. This latter category has increasingly encompassed organized crime figures, such as diamond smugglers, drug traffickers and particularly abusive human smugglers.<sup>80</sup>

Embodied in Resolution 2653, the UN's Haiti sanctions regime stands out for its explicit focus on criminal actors as the primary threats to peace and security and because it enables the designation of those supporting them or supporting select criminal markets in Haiti more broadly. The resolution also set up a targeted arms embargo, and explicitly enabled the designation of actors circumventing it (see Figure 5).

In theory, the UN sanctions regime is robustly designed, enabling the targeting of both gangs and the criminal and political ecosystems which have fuelled and enabled them. In approving the resolution, the UNSC framed the sanctions threat as a clear political message to Haiti's gangs, and an indication of international willingness to respond to the peace and security challenges in the country.

In practice, however, the UN regime has moved relatively slowly. From October 2022 to December 2023, only one actor was sanctioned: Jimmy Chérizier, the leader of the G9 gang coalition, who stands accused of various human rights abuses and criminal activities. While Chérizier and the G9 are key actors in Haiti, the analysis above underscores that they are simply one aspect of a multifaceted and worsening problem.

In December 2023, the UN designated four additional gang leaders under the sanctions regime:

- Johnson André (aka 'Izo'), leader of the 5 Segond gang and a key player within G-Pèp
- Renel Destina, leader of the Grand Ravine gang and an important ally of G-Pèp and Izo
- Wilson Joseph, leader of the 400 Mawozo gang
- Vitelhomme Innocent, leader of the Kraze Barye gang



**FIGURE 5** Select UN Security Council resolutions salient to sanctions and organized crime.

SOURCE: Convergence zone: The evolution of targeted sanctions usage against organized crime, GI-TOC, September 2023

15. Decides that the provisions [...] shall apply to individuals and entities, as designated for such measures by the Committee [...], as responsible for or complicit in, or having engaged in, directly or indirectly, actions that threaten the peace, security or stability of Haiti;
16. Decides that such actions [...] include, but are not limited to:
  - a. Engaging in, directly or indirectly, or supporting criminal activities and violence involving armed groups and criminal networks that promote violence, including forcible recruitment of children by such groups and networks, kidnappings, trafficking in persons and the smuggling of migrants, and homicides and sexual and gender-based violence;
  - b. Supporting illicit trafficking and diversion of arms and related materiel, or illicit financial flows related thereto;
  - c. Acting for or on behalf of or at the direction of or otherwise supporting or financing an individual or entity designated in connection with the activity described [...] above, including through the direct or indirect use of the proceeds from organized crime, including proceeds from illicit production and trafficking in drugs and their precursors originating in or transiting through Haiti, the trafficking in persons and the smuggling of migrants from Haiti, or the smuggling and trafficking of arms to or from Haiti;
  - d. Acting in violation of the arms embargo established in paragraph 11 of this resolution, or as having directly or indirectly supplied, sold, or transferred to armed groups or criminal networks in Haiti, or as having been the recipient of, arms or any related materiel, or any technical advice, training, or assistance, including financing and financial assistance, related to violent activities of armed groups or criminal networks in Haiti;
  - e. Planning, directing, or committing acts that violate international human rights law or acts that constitute human rights abuses, including those involving extrajudicial killing, including of women and children, and the commission of acts of violence, abduction, enforced disappearances, or kidnappings for ransom in Haiti;
  - f. Planning, directing or committing acts involving sexual and gender-based violence, including rape and sexual slavery, in Haiti;
  - g. Obstructing delivery of humanitarian assistance to Haiti or access to, or distribution of, humanitarian assistance in Haiti;
  - h. Attacking personnel or premises of United Nations missions and operations in Haiti, providing support for such attacks[.]

These designations remain relatively narrowly focused, encompassing top leaders of gangs in the Port-au-Prince region. The UN's Panel of Experts on Haiti, which was established to support the work of the Sanctions Committee, issued a report in September 2023 that traces in detail the activities of the criminal networks enabling gangs (notably weapons traffickers) and the politicians and businessmen who allegedly financially support them.

However, the UN Security Council has not imposed sanctions on these actors.<sup>81</sup> This is arguably a missed opportunity, since politicians and businesspeople are more internationally connected, and hence stand to lose more in the event of asset freezes and travel bans.

However, the UN sanctions regime has been complemented by unilateral designations by other jurisdictions, mainly Canada and the United States. Between late 2022 and early 2024, Canada has unilaterally designated 28 individuals under the Special Economic Measures (Haiti) Regulations, focusing mainly on politicians and businessmen linked to the gangs.<sup>82</sup> The US, in turn, has issued nine designations under thematic regimes such as the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act and Executive Order 14059, which deals with the global illicit drug trade.<sup>83</sup> There has been substantial bilateral coordination on the designations, with the US and Canada repeatedly issuing sanctions on the same actors. The US has also banned several Haitian actors from entering its territory, under the Department of State 7031(c) authorization, an approach also used by the Dominican Republic, which has banned entry by 52 Haitians.<sup>84</sup>

**FIGURE 6** Designation criteria for the Haiti regime of sanctions.

SOURCE: UN Security Council Resolution 2653, 2022

The EU has established its own framework for issuing designations separate from the UN regime, focused on entities and individuals ‘threatening peace, security or stability ... or undermining democracy or the rule of law in Haiti.’ However, to date the bloc has not undertaken any such autonomous action.<sup>85</sup>

Notably, US and Canadian authorities have been willing to designate politically powerful individuals. This includes senior officials in the administration of former president Jovenel Moïse, who were then dismissed from the administration, and the president of Haiti’s senate.

There is some evidence that UN sanctions and unilateral actions by other jurisdictions are having an effect on the ground. The UN Panel of Experts cites contacts (both Haitians and relevant international personnel) as perceiving a ‘relative impact, most notably in terms of change of behaviour, in particular of several political and financial actors.’<sup>86</sup> Recent GI-TOC fieldwork in Haiti indicates that the focus by Canada and the US on businesspeople accused of working with or financing gangs has led to particular concern within the business and political communities, with Haitian banks increasingly limiting services to those designated.<sup>87</sup>

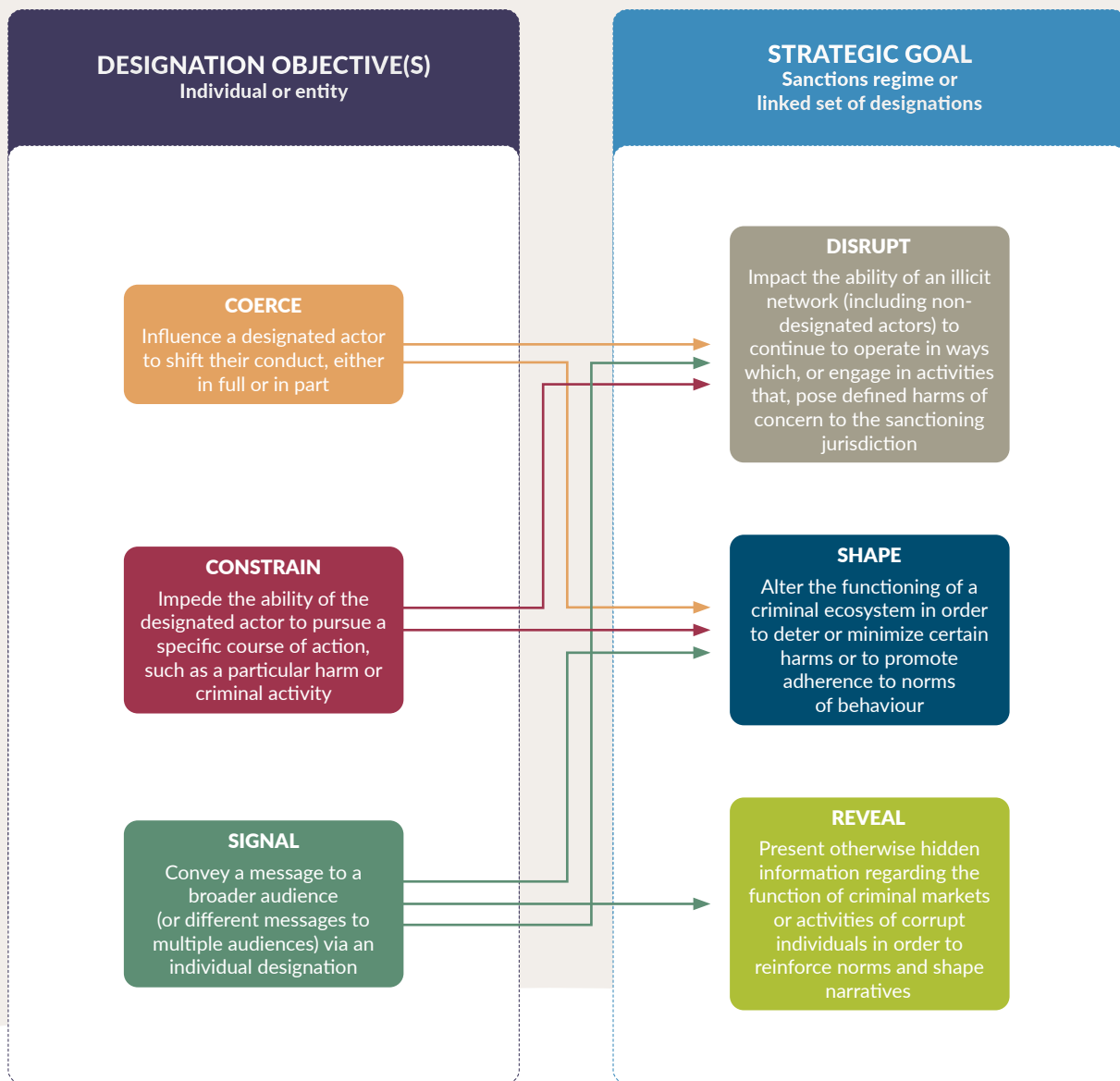
Businessmen who have not yet been targeted said that they were afraid, and were acting in ways designed to mitigate the risk they faced. ‘Sanctions provoke fear; fear of losing money, of losing access to dollar bank accounts, of losing local clout, reputation, friendships,’ said one prominent Haitian businessman. ‘Sanctions are seen as a sword of Damocles, [or] a spider’s web that elites cannot control.’<sup>88</sup> Such concern is understandable, given the reliance by the business community on access to international finance and the importance of being able to travel for their work.

Evidence of a net negative impact on the gangs themselves, however, is limited. There may be an impact on how gangs are funded, with businessmen eschewing patronage, but this could prompt the gangs to rely increasingly on kidnappings.<sup>89</sup> Largely, the gang leaders in Haiti are internal actors with a generally limited need to travel abroad or keep funds abroad. While many have extensive international contacts, these are primarily used to facilitate criminal activities and financial profiteering within Haiti, limiting the influence of the current designations.

Added to this, there has been no comprehensive effort to sanction any of the gangs’ secondary and tertiary leaders, enablers or logisticians. Rather, the UN and international community have generally followed a similar approach to that taken in more conventional conflict zones; designating in a politically even-handed way key leaders of competing groups. Such a strategy is sensible in a situation defined by political contestation, ensuring sanctions are not interpreted as biased against one side or the other, and hence complicating negotiations.

It is arguably less valuable in a situation of criminal contestation. In such a situation, efforts to designate a range of individual leaders of different gangs arguably lessens the impact sanctions have on each gang overall. In effect, the leader may face difficulties, but the impact on a gang’s operations overall is likely to be limited. This stands in contrast to potentially more substantial disruption that can emerge when sanctions are levied comprehensively on senior and mid-level leaders, enablers, logisticians and supporters.

The question of how sanctions on Haiti’s gangs are designed – contrasting breadth in targeting numerous gangs as opposed to in-depth focus on one or two – has salience beyond the targeted organizations themselves. The impact of sanctions on the operations of gangs in turn influences how other, non-targeted gangs interpret the threat of sanctions, and influences whether they assess the need to shape their actions so as to avoid the risk of being designated in the future. As previous



**FIGURE 7** Designation objectives and strategic goals of sanctions on criminal actors.

SOURCE: Hard targets: Identifying a framework of objectives for targeted sanctions on illicit economies, GI-TOC, December 2023

GI-TOC research has underscored, this shaping of criminal ecosystems can be an important strategic goal of sanctions approaches on organized crime (see Figure 7).<sup>90</sup>

Finally, there has been limited focus by the relevant international authorities on players in the broader criminal ecosystem that gangs operate within, such as weapons traffickers, meaning that crucial gang logistical networks remain unscathed in their ability to facilitate gangs' continued operations.

Despite the muted impact of designations thus far imposed on gangs, the UN Panel of Experts flagged that many Haitians were keen to see an expansion of UN sanctions. This is a valuable sign of support, and one that is in stark contrast with many other contexts where UN sanctions are seen as an unwelcome imposition.<sup>91</sup> It underscores the need to move aggressively on further designations, both to leverage the current moment of support and validate the expectations of Haitians in the efficacy of the sanctions tool.

Crossroads between  
Tabarre and Delmas,  
Port-au-Prince, November  
2023. Photo: Romain Le  
Cour Grandmaison/GI-TOC



## The Multinational Security Support mission: A new model of international intervention against organized crime

The second key policy tool developed by the UN and the broader international community to address the challenge posed by gangs in Haiti is the MSS mission, authorized by the UNSC in Resolution 2699 (2023).

It is important to underscore that the drive for the MSS mission came from multiple actors, notably including the Haitian government, with the administration of Ariel Henry detailing in writing and in speeches a desire for an international force to help address gang violence.<sup>92</sup>

The concept of an international mission also received broad support from the UN Secretary General (UNSG) and regional community even before its authorization. On 8 October 2022, the UNSG, António Guterres, outlined a non-UN mission to support the HNP in a letter addressed to the UNSC.<sup>93</sup> In January 2023, in a declaration issued in Buenos Aires, the heads of state and government of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the regional bloc, encouraged member states to consider participating in the multinational force.<sup>94</sup> Following Kenya's announcement that it would consider leading a multinational security support mission to Haiti, the Organization of American States and Caribbean Community (CARICOM) both issued statements in support of this prospect.<sup>95</sup>

Haitian civil society organizations also pressed for an international force to be authorized. In February 2023, a survey presented by the civil society organization Diagnostic and Development Group and a private sector group called the Alliance pour la Gestion des Risques et la Continuité des Activités announced that 79% of respondents (45% of whom were women) favoured assistance in the form of an international armed force.<sup>96</sup> Following meetings with the CARICOM delegation, two Haitian civil society groups issued statements strongly requesting the deployment of international forces.<sup>97</sup>

As the situation in the country continued to deteriorate, the UNSG received a second letter (dated 7 June 2023) from Haiti's prime minister reiterating the request for robust support to Haitian security forces to re-establish peace and security in the country.<sup>98</sup> In response, the UNSG expressed its support for an authorization under Chapter VII of the UN charter in a report to the UNSC.<sup>99</sup> Taking into account the Secretary General's 8 October 2022 letter to the UNSC, a report of the UNSG dated 14 April 2023<sup>100</sup> and a statement issued by Jamaica on behalf of CARICOM in support of the multinational security efforts, the Security Council decided to take action.<sup>101</sup>

|                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Authorization</b>                                              | The UNSC authorizes member states to form and deploy a Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission in compliance with international law, including international human rights law                                                                                                  |
| <b>Lead country</b>                                               | Kenya                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Duration</b>                                                   | 12 months (reviewed after 9 months)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Costs of implementation</b>                                    | Voluntary contributions and support from member states and regional organizations                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Means</b>                                                      | Providing operational support for planning and conducting joint security operations to counter gangs<br>Providing support for the provision of security for critical infrastructure and transit locations (airports, ports, schools, hospitals)                                     |
| <b>Urgent temporary measures (including arrest and detention)</b> | Allowed on an exceptional basis<br>Limited scope and time<br>Consistent with the authorization and proportionate<br>Full compliance with international law, including international human rights law<br>Updates to the UNSC when adopted                                            |
| <b>Rules of engagement and directives on the use of force</b>     | At the discretion of the leadership of the MSS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Arms embargo</b>                                               | Member states shall take all appropriate measures to prevent the direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer to Haiti of small arms, light weapons and ammunitions                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Other requests</b>                                             | Adoption of appropriate wastewater management and other environmental controls<br>Cooperation with BINUH and other UN agencies<br>Highest standard of transparency, conduct and discipline<br>Information on the scope of operations to be provided to the UNSC prior to deployment |
| <b>Reporting to UNSC</b>                                          | Every three months as part of regular reporting                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |

**FIGURE 8** The Multinational Security Support mission framework.

## An atypical intervention force

The non-UN form of the MSS intervention is atypical and sets a precedent as a potential new model for international cooperation in security matters. It is the first time that the UNSC has invoked Chapter 7 for a non-UN mission to address organized crime and violence associated with it. Traditionally, Chapter 7 has been used to set out the UNSC's powers to maintain peace by recognizing a threat to security, a breach to peace or aggression.<sup>102</sup> This generally means a deployment of UN blue helmets with a mandate to take military and nonmilitary action to 'restore international peace and security'. When non-UN missions have been deployed since the Cold War, generally they have been very temporary, giving way to a UN peacekeeping mission. This is not the case with the MSS mission, which is envisioned as a sole intervention force.

Notably, the resolution does not detail UN leadership of the mission. This does not mean the UN is not involved with the implementation of the mission. The UN will provide logistical and operational support to the MSS mission. The Resolution also establishes detailed reporting requirements by the MSS mission to the UNSC.<sup>103</sup> It requests that the mission continuously coordinate with the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH), which is mandated to promote and strengthen political

stability and good governance,<sup>104</sup> and with other UN agencies such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the UN Human Rights Office.<sup>105</sup>

Resolution 2699 (2023) emphasizes that the Government of Haiti holds primary responsible for the provision of security and highlights the importance of a fully functioning police force. The scope of the MSS mission is thus limited and two-pronged. The mission aims to restore security in Haiti and assist the police in stabilizing the situation to pave the way for elections.<sup>106</sup> To achieve these aims, the mission is mandated to strengthen the HNP in its anti-gang operations, by increasing its capacity through the planning and execution of joint operations to ensure security for critical infrastructure and transit sites. The mission is further tasked with supporting the HNP in ensuring safe access for the population to humanitarian aid.<sup>107</sup> This should help to regain control over areas dominated by gangs and reduce human suffering.

The institutional vacuum and weak border controls in Haiti create a favourable environment for criminal exploitation. The growing scope of rural gangs has worsened food insecurity in Haiti, while urban gangs' obstruction of humanitarian assistance by blocking access to ports and roads has deepened the humanitarian crisis in the country. Roadblocks by gangs, punitively high illicit taxation and the theft of goods are preventing people from accessing basic needs, including food.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, the scaling up of criminal activities in Haiti has the potential to create a ripple effect in transnational criminality across the broader region, driving up the demand for and trafficking of illicit firearms arms from Dominican Republic and Jamaica. This point was raised by the Panel of Experts in September 2023.<sup>109</sup>

It is unclear, however, under which parameters joint operations will take place and how compliance with human rights obligations and other international requirements will be achieved during those operations.

Resolution 2699 (2023) also allows the adoption of urgent temporary measures on an exceptional basis to maintain law and order and public safety, including the arrest and detention of suspects.<sup>110</sup> This essentially provides the MSS mission with the authority to arrest suspects to prevent the loss of life, within the limits of its capacities and objectives as set out in the resolution. In giving 'teeth' to the mission, this provision should be carefully designed within a clearly defined *modus operandi*, ahead of any attempt to implement it in the field. Alongside providing the mission with extensive executive powers, the resolution requires the prospective mission to build in broad human rights guarantees. For example, paragraph 7 stipulates the need to protect children and vulnerable groups, to include expertise in anti-gang and community oriented policing, a focus on the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence and responses to it that are victim-centred. The resolution also encourages the representation of women at all levels of the mission.

As GI-TOC research has previously established, while women and girls face disproportionate risks of gang-related gender-based violence, gender-centred approaches to respond to the problem are lacking.<sup>111</sup> Some of the needs highlighted by the same study include involving women and girls in the identification of solutions to gender-based violence and building the capacity of institutions in which women can trust and create cross-sectoral collaboration to provide services that are tailored for women and girls.

The resolution establishes safeguards that clearly intend to avoid the problems that have beset several peacekeeping interventions. It establishes the need to take necessary action to ensure discipline and avoid sexual exploitation and abuse, through timely investigation of misconduct, the provision of an accountability mechanism and the repatriation of units credibly accused of misconduct (notably including alleged instances of widespread or systematic exploitation and abuse).



Road leading to Fort Jacques, Port-au-Prince, November 2023. Photo: Romain Le Cour Grandmaison/GI-TOC

Human rights approaches to the use of force are paramount to avoid creating further mistrust between communities, the HNP and the MSS mission. As emphasized in the Secretary-General's report, for the mission to be effective, it must gain the trust of the community on the ground.<sup>112</sup> To do this, the force must prevent human rights abuses and incidents of sexual exploitation. The mission must therefore adhere to clear human rights protocols and establish internal and independent oversight, which should extend to the participation of civil society and women.

The needs for transparency, accountability and oversight are further reinforced in paragraphs 10 and 11. Additionally, in paragraph 12, the resolution expressly requests the MSS mission to adopt an appropriate wastewater management strategy and other environmental controls to guard against the introduction and spread of water-borne disease.

Both MINUSTAH, and the subsequent justice support mission to Haiti, MINUJUSTH, were seen as highly controversial, beset by allegations of sexual misconduct by peacekeepers and viewed as negligent in the face of the spread of a cholera epidemic within the country's population.<sup>113</sup> A repetition of any of those mistakes would clearly risk sparking resentment among the population.

As the international community faces more and more cases that require urgent and radical responses, international cooperation on policing to tackle organized crime will potentially likewise become more and more common. This makes it all the more important that the prospective MSS mission to Haiti is bestowed with clear and nuanced operational parameters from the outset.

## Potential risks and challenges for the mission

The coalition of countries that have signalled a willingness to deploy personnel to the MSS mission – Kenya, a clutch of other African nations and CARICOM – undoubtedly have a huge task ahead. Such coalitions have been successful in the past,<sup>114</sup> but there are risks. We break these risks down into four key categories – modalities for the use of force; avoiding a narrowly focused approach to buttressing the HNP; the pitfall of the criminal landscape evolving in response to the mission; and the danger of under-funding by the international community.

Firstly, operational parameters centring on the use of force should be firmly established ahead of deployment, including mechanisms to prevent collateral harm to civilians in the context of what amounts to urban warfare. This should extend to a clear definition of the rules of engagement, over and above the existing emphasis on detailed reporting to the UNSC.

Since the mission will very likely be involved in armed confrontation with major gangs, there is a clear risk of civilians getting caught in the crossfire. There is also the risk of erroneously targeting civilians due to difficulties in distinguishing gang members from non-gang members. Operations in gang-controlled areas require expertise in urban policing in hostile environments.

All this makes it crucial to engage in explicit planning for circumstances in which force is used, and how civilians will be protected under those scenarios. Likely scenarios for these joint operations should be carefully war gamed in advance.

Paragraph 5 of the resolution establishes that member states participating in the mission are authorized to take ‘all necessary measures’ to fulfil its mandate in strict compliance with international law and international human rights law. This is a clear call to limit the scope in the use of force, in accordance to human rights obligations. However, Paragraph 9 of the resolution appears to lack a clear definition of scope, since the leadership of the mission is to be given discretion over the resort to the use of force and the rules of engagement. Although this authorization of the use of force might be similar to other UN authorizations, the leeway for the use of force risks being excessive without the strict oversight of the UNSC. In that sense, the rules for engagement and deployment of force should be set out beforehand in strict observance of human rights law.

As experience demonstrates, heavily securitized police operations and responses to organized crime and criminal violence that are centred in narratives focusing on the ‘fight against crime’ can escalate violence and human rights abuses against civilians.<sup>115</sup> Examples of police operations from across the world, including in the region, show that excessive use of force in policing is synonymous with severe human rights violations, including extra-judicial killings. Police operations can set in motion escalatory dynamics, as violent actions perpetrated by groups are often in response to states policies.

Secondly, there needs to be a strategic approach to buttressing the HNP and addressing high-level corruption within the police. The deployment of external police will not be effective without appropriate capacity building and resource allocation to the HNP. As we highlight above, many members of the HNP have either lost their lives in counter-gang efforts or are under-protected and at risk from the gangs, which has the potential to make them wary of engaging with the MSS mission. Coupled with systemic under-resourcing, poor supply chain management (including of weapons) and the absence of a national strategy for combating the gangs, the mission risks lacking a meaningful domestic security partner.

Efforts to strengthen the HNP should not overlook existing criminal relationships between officers and senior gang personnel. As noted, there are regular reports of police officers colluding with gangs or becoming gang members (including most notoriously Chérizier).<sup>116</sup> Equally, police officers have an established history of engagement with vigilantes. The MSS mission should work to avoid the leakage of crucial and confidential information. In this context, there should be encouragement to the HNP to vet all its members and remove from service any officers who have colluded with gangs.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, efforts to strengthen the HNP will not be fully effective without comprehensive engagement with the whole criminal justice chain – including the judiciary and the prison system. Currently, Haiti's judicial sector and penal system are highly dysfunctional. Haiti's prisons are over-crowded and conditions therein are dire. If the mission focuses largely on supporting the HNP in rounding up low-level gang members, the crisis in prisons and detention centres could escalate further.<sup>118</sup> As noted by the Secretary General's report, the implementation of the national strategy on disarmament, dismantlement and reintegration and community violence reduction will be key elements to prevent bottlenecks in the criminal justice system and promote transitional justice.<sup>119</sup>

It is therefore critical that the international community work with Haiti's government to develop a realistic plan for comprehensive reform of the criminal justice system (HNP, judiciary and prisons), rather than pushing narrowly focused security sector reform. There may also be benefit in the international community conceptualizing responses to the judicial and penal bottlenecks creatively, such as the through the development of hybrid in-country tribunals for major criminals and the deployment of trained corrections personnel to support Haitian staff. There is also reason to focus on the risks of corruption within the MSS mission. This has long been a significant challenge for UN peacekeeping missions writ large, with regular accusations emerging of diversion and sale of logistical supplies, arms sales and bribe taking.<sup>120</sup> Further, while Kenyan police officers have often been on the front line of tough environments, and are versed in tackling gangs and terrorism, the force has struggled to address corruption within its ranks.<sup>121</sup>

Arguably, in an environment such as Haiti where the challenge involves criminal actors with a long history of strategically corrupting law enforcement, corruption risks are even more acute than normal peacekeeping deployments.

For these reasons, the MSS mission, and the UN more broadly, should explicitly develop plans to mitigate corruption risks and aggressively address instances of maleficence within its ranks. The requirement, detailed in the updated 2023 UN Sanctions mandate for Haiti, that the MSS report lost or stolen weapons to the Panel of Experts is an important step in addressing vulnerabilities.<sup>122</sup> Another avenue to mitigate corruption risks should be the deployment of an empowered internal affairs policing unit as part of the MSS mission, with the capacity to initiate investigations of officers from any contributing country.

The third key risk is that the criminal ecosystem shifts in response to the arrival of the MSS mission. As the mission strengthens law enforcement and the state's capacity to respond to gangs on one side, it also risks reshaping the power dynamics of gangs. While introducing boots on the ground and armed personnel, the mission risks introducing more weapons and armed actors into the situation. This can have repercussions, such as giving gangs an incentive to further escalate their arsenals, or uniting them in a common front against the mission.<sup>123</sup>

There is a need for diligent monitoring of the resolution's arms embargo to avoid triggering an arms race between gangs and police. Aligned with the sanctions regime, the resolution authorizing the MSS

mission strongly calls for a global ban on arms sales to Haiti, except to the UN or a UN-authorized mission or to a security force that operates under the command of Haiti's government.<sup>124</sup> This caveat inevitably allows for arms flow into the country and may increase the likelihood of diversion (with its potential human rights consequences, including armed violence against civilians).

As explored above, the prospective arrival of the international force has already seen gangs add to weapons stockpiles and prepare for combat. The UNSC's reauthorization of the Panel of Experts explicitly calls for information sharing between the MSS mission and Panel of Experts on the diversion of firearms. This would be key to curbing the proliferation of illicit firearms and in line with international commitments that member states may be signatories to, including the Arms Trade Treaty and the Firearms Protocol.

Fourth, to avoid the risk of the mission failing to gain traction on the ground, there needs to be strategic buy-in by the international community, especially in terms of ensuring logistical and financial support. Kenya has offered to supply a contingent of 1 000 officers, drawn from the Rapid Deployment Unit, Anti-Stock Theft Unit, General Service Unit and the Border Patrol Unit, which have extensive experience in peacekeeping operations.<sup>125</sup>

The decision by Kenya's High Court on 26 January 2024 to designate the government's current deployment plan – which would have seen the first troops arrive as early as February – as unconstitutional indicates that the MSS mission will take some months yet to get off the ground, and it has even sparked concerns that the mission could be stillborn.<sup>126</sup> However, in its ruling, the High Court noted that its decision was based at least in part on the absence of a 'reciprocal arrangement'<sup>127</sup> between the governments of Kenya and Haiti, suggesting that the conclusion of such an agreement could serve as path forwards.

More funding is arguably needed. The US has pledged to supply logistical and financial assistance of up to US\$200 million,<sup>128</sup> but will not deploy its security forces on the ground.<sup>129</sup> The United Nations will implement the trust fund called for by the UNSC as a vehicle to facilitate voluntary contributions to the mission by member states.

The 1 000 officers offered by Kenya is lower than the total size of previous multilateral interventions in Haiti.<sup>130</sup> However, other Caribbean countries, such as Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas and Jamaica, have also pledged support to the mission with an additional contingent of officers.<sup>131</sup> Chad, Senegal and Burundi have also pledged personnel.<sup>132</sup>

Ulrika Richardson, the UN's resident coordinator in Haiti, has stated that the force should be around 2 500 strong, though the composition has not been finalized.<sup>133</sup> That number would be half of what is arguably needed to create an impact (about 3 500 to 4 500 officers).<sup>134</sup> However, it is also important to bear in mind the shortfall in the HNP, which has far less operational capacity than it needs, as mentioned previously.

There is arguably a need for Kenya and the international community to think creatively about what mix of forces is needed. This in turn will depend on what the concept of operations is, and the resultant mix of forces required. If the aim is to tackle gangs directly in urban strongholds – akin to the role of MINUSTAH in 2008 – then requests for special tactics units and intelligence personnel are likely. However, if the goal is to address the criminal ecosystem and increase the logistical friction costs for gangs of procuring weapons and ammunition, a different mix of forces are needed, likely involving



**Road in the Pétion-Ville district after heavy rains, November 2023.** Photo: Romain Le Cour Grandmaison/GI-TOC

a mix of border security units, coast guard vessels and basic police units able to provide perimeter security of ports and protection to customs officers.

In any scenario, an emphasis should be placed on criminal intelligence capacity. This proved to be vital during the MINUSTAH era, and is likely even more salient in the present day, given the complexity of the current situation. Crucially, while most criminal intelligence staff deployed will likely be working on tactical issues, regular strategic analysis and scenario development will be crucial, in order to envision and stay ahead of any shifts in the criminal ecosystem.

During the likely lull caused by the High Court ruling in Kenya, time can be optimized and used to prepare and coordinate the mission. Close coordination of the MSS mission with the United Nations system in Haiti will be critical. This would include coordination with the BINUH and other agencies.

Finally, there needs to be efforts to synchronize the sanctions regime with the MSS mission. Even though the sanctions regime emerged in 2022, at roughly the same time that discussions on the mission gained ground, there is no specific language in Resolution 2699 (2023) dictating how the two strands of international effort in Haiti will intersect, how they can reinforce one another and what type of operational and political challenges will arise on the ground. There is a crucial need to reinforce coordination, given the shared peace and security objectives of both the sanctions regime and the mission, and the explicit focus of both on countering gangs and other criminal actors driving the current unrest.

The resolution hits the right note in acknowledging that the need to create a safe environment in Haiti goes beyond the MSS mission, and that financial support should be dedicated for long-term

economic, social and institutional development. Equally, the emphasis on a Haitian-led political process is laudable. Without promising long-term political or economic solutions through a Haitian-led process, the situation is likely to collapse back into chaos upon any withdrawal of the mission. Paraphrasing the former force commander of MINUSTAH, Brazilian Lieutenant General Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz, it would be an illusion to think that the solutions would come from outside Haiti.<sup>135</sup>

One of the ways Haitian authorities can do this is by engaging with the sanctions regime. Arguably, there is a closer potential synergy between the MSS mission and the Sanctions Committee than in previous UN missions. The force is explicitly focused on supporting and assisting Haiti's police in addressing the harms and challenges generated by gangs. This is effectively a bottom-up policing mission, focused on limiting criminal activities such as economic predation, kidnapping and drug trafficking which fuel the gangs' power.

The Panel of Experts' report is blunt in noting that 'international sanctions alone cannot curb the current levels of armed violence.'<sup>136</sup> A strategic, well thought through approach is particularly important given the UN's often poor history of coordinating sanctions regimes, and linked panels of experts, with peace support operations. This has been traced to a variety of organizational issues, including limited communication and understanding by peace support forces of the work undertaken by UN panels of experts and sanctions committees, and siloing between different UN units.<sup>137</sup>

These points echo GI-TOC research on sanctions against transnational organized crime, which details how sanctions generally work best when they are part of a broader strategy encompassing a suite of diplomatic, security and prosecutorial tools.<sup>138</sup> This underscores both the need for the force to receive timely analysis of the evolution of violent dynamics on the ground, to work in tandem with the Sanctions Committee and Panel of Experts to address worsening violence in Haiti, and the importance of strategically coordinating the diplomatic, security and prosecutorial elements. If properly coordinated, there is substantial benefit in building up ground-level policing, while pressing down through sanctions on criminals and elite enablers.



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**A** carefully calibrated combination of approaches – building up policing and cooperation via the MSS force and pressing down via sanctions – thus has a substantial opportunity to shape the situation in a way that would be difficult to achieve individually.

Ensuring that the two strands of international response do work in tandem, however, will require proactive effort both on the part of MSS planners and Sanctions Committee representatives or the UN secretariat staff which support them. Some short-term recommendations follow below.

### Coordination and planning between the MSS mission, Sanctions Committee and Panel of Experts

The first and arguably most important task involves preliminary meetings intended to establish a shared understanding of mandates, operational approaches and current objectives for each side. This should then lead to development of a joint plan on how the respective actors can work together. In part, this is a technical issue, identifying for example at which level MSS officials will interact with UN panel members and how information developed by these bodies can be shared. However, such planning should also detail a strategic vision of what international actors are trying to achieve via designations and the MSS mission and over what timeline.

There is arguably a need for radical practicality. It is likely that some gang leaders and political elites sanctioned by the UN and unilateral actors or arrested and detained by the mission may change their behaviour. However, full scale systemic change is unlikely to happen in the near term. Simply, gangs and organized crime have developed deep roots in many areas of the country over a long-time span, and expecting their full-scale demobilization or elimination is unrealistic. Because of this, it is more useful for the international community to focus on near term objectives, involving both sanctions and the MSS deployment, on more nuanced efforts, such as disrupting the ability of gang leaders to cause harms, increasing the friction costs of criminal activities, and deterring those facilitating or funding gang operations, in so doing impeding and weakening gangs' power and that of their backers.

Gangs throughout the country are also linked to, and often financially supported by, business and political actors. These elites are more difficult for the Haitian police to target, and will also likely pose a challenge for the MSS force. However, as has already been seen, sanctions and the threat of sanctions are both an instrument which can be used to target such powerful actors and one that already

has a degree of impact. Effectively, multilateral and unilateral sanctions can push down on targeted individuals who are crucial to the illicit economy and who would otherwise enjoy effective impunity.

While elite connections have ebbed in salience as a funding source for gangs, there is a risk that such connections can quickly be reactivated. Deterring elite engagement with gangs and altering norms should thus be a key strategic goal for the MSS mission and Sanctions Committee.

## **Target criminal ecosystems to counter gangs**

Second, an explicit focus by the MSS mission and sanctions regime should be placed on pressuring and shaping Haiti's criminal ecosystem in order to systematically limit the power of gangs. An example is the ecosystem around trafficked weaponry. Currently, gangs enjoy ready access to weaponry and ammunition, smuggled in via ports and overland across the border with the Dominican Republic. In turn, the availability of weaponry shapes the willingness of gangs to use such weapons, whether to counter other gangs, coerce the HNP or – in the future – to counter efforts by the MSS force to stymie their operations. Addressing the broader criminal ecosystem within Haiti is thus essential, and may be more feasible for the force as its initial elements deploy, when manpower and field intelligence will likely be limited.

An ecosystem shaping approach should start with an emphasis on border security – both along the land border with the Dominican Republic and in Haiti's territorial waters (the Haitian coastguard is part of the HNP, effectively authorizing MSS maritime patrol operations) – in order to impede the entry of weapons and other contraband into Haiti. Further, it would entail perimeter protection of commercial seaports and security provision to customs officers, enabling more thorough and unimpeded searches of arriving cargo for guns and ammunition. Next, it should include targeted raids and arrests – including operations conducted in coordination with regional states – targeting weapons trafficking networks. Finally, it would involve the mapping of and comprehensive action against the financial networks underpinning weapons trafficking and sales, using both prosecutorial and sanctions-based approaches.

Expectations should be managed realistically: such approaches will not end weapons trafficking to Haiti, but they will increase the cost and difficulty of trafficking, which will in turn filter down to gangs. If replacement of guns and ammunition becomes difficult and expensive, this could in turn influence gang decision making on the use of force.

## **Expedite sanctions designations**

Third, once the MSS concept of operations and deployment plan has been developed, the Sanctions Committee should move with greater speed on issuing further designations. Prioritization should be given to designation of actors in areas where the force will be deployed, ideally in a concentrated manner that focuses on disrupting the ecosystem of organized crime there. A concentrated, ecosystem-focused approach helps to offset the fact that many Haitian gang leaders have little external financial or travel exposure and are largely immune to such asset freezes and travel bans. Individuals may be insulated, but ecosystems are often not, and by knocking out exposed elements, it should be possible to constrain and weaken even the most insulated of internal actors.

As an example, if the mission deploys to Artibonite department, which after Port-au-Prince is the country's major hotspot for gang violence, sanctions designations should focus on the leaders of the Gran Grif, Kokorat San Ras, and the Coalition des Révolutionnaires pour Sauver l'Artibonite gangs, as well as the broader local criminal ecosystem, such as logistical enablers (particularly weapons traffickers) and the politicians and businessmen connected to the gangs.

Crucially, such a concentrated sanctions focus should continue even after the MSS force is on the ground. The mission, in conjunction with the HNP, should focus its efforts on targeting sanctioned gangs' operations on the ground, by means of targeted operations and arrests, as well as constraining their ability to operate, via patrolling and maintaining a presence in key areas.

## **Continually map criminal ecosystems**

Fourth, while the Panel of Experts has done excellent initial work mapping out criminal ecosystems in Haiti, once the force is deployed and working closely with the HNP, it in turn will likely gather investigative leads and evidence on the nature of the local criminal ecosystem. Some of this information – particularly on higher level gang leaders, firearms trafficking or elites supporting them – should then be channelled towards further designations, either via information sharing with the Panel of Experts, or direct engagement with a member state on the Sanctions Committee, or engagement with states involved in unilateral designations in Haiti.

Such a concentrated approach offers the potential for substantial 'bottom-up/top-down' synergy and impact, albeit in a relatively constrained area. However, 'wins' in an area like Artibonite can have substantial signalling power to criminal actors and Haitian society more broadly, giving momentum to national and international efforts to address the most acute harms caused by criminal actors.

Ideally, countries involved in 'gold-plating' the UN regime should also be brought into the strategy in a concentrated manner. Their involvement could be critical given the more rapid pace of their designation processes, which would allow for a more rapid response to any shifts on the ground than the UN's Haiti Sanctions Committee would likely be able to achieve.

## **Human rights and community at the centre**

Fifth, human rights and communities in Haiti should be at the centre of responses to organized crime and gangs in the country. Trust within communities can be gained by implementing human rights approaches when developing strategies to respond to the crisis. In this sense, the protection of civilians and the risk that the MSS mission could cause unintended harms and exacerbate human rights violations, particularly gender-based violations, need to be taken into account. The establishment and implementation of human rights standards and accountability mechanisms for the MSS mission are key to preventing such risks. Coordination with civil society, including women's rights groups, the UN Human Rights Office and other human rights monitoring mechanisms should also ensure that human rights are upheld.

## **Fine-tune and repeat messaging**

Finally, once on the ground the MSS force and Sanctions Committee should be explicit, vocal and continuous in highlighting what they seek to achieve and what is beyond their mandate. They should be portrayed as a means of shaping a positive outcome for the Haitian people by addressing key impediments to peace. In particular, emphasis should be placed on conveying the message that sanctions are not an effort to punish designees, or a means of avoiding Haiti's law enforcement and judicial systems. Such explicit and repetitive messaging is key for sustaining the support of both Haitian and international public opinion, and in blunting efforts by spoilers to rally public support by claiming the international actions infringe Haiti's sovereignty and interests.



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