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Haiti's Government Seeks to Restore Security with International Support



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Security support mission must partner in unprecedented ways with Haiti's civil society.
- The new government needs a comprehensive counter-gang strategy.
- This strategy must aim to rebuild trust within communities and protect human rights if it is to establish long-term peace and stability.

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Many Haitians expressed genuine sympathy and shared loss when an American missionary couple, Davy and Natalie Lloyd, were [killed by gangs](#) alongside Jude Montis, the local director of the Missions in Haiti organization where they were working. Following a confusing few hours of attacks and counter-attacks by rival gangs on May 23, the tragic shootings and subsequent burning of the male bodies quickly made national news in the United States, in part because of the prominence of the couple — Natalie Lloyd is the daughter of Missouri State Representative Ben Baker and Davy Lloyd's family is prominent in Oklahoma.

But for Haitians, as much as they lamented the deaths of the Americans, such violence is part of daily life for them. Gangs have taken control of [80 percent](#) of Port-au-Prince and are increasingly pushing into areas outside the capital. The fact that there was no security force to call on to respond to the attack and no one readily available to even recover the bodies was no surprise to Haitians. It's not an expectation they would have in a country where gangs killed or injured [more than 4,700 people in 2023](#) and more than 600,000 [have been displaced](#) from their homes.

The momentum over the past three years has shifted strongly away from any legitimate security forces and in favor of the gangs, as they have grown more emboldened even as the capacity of the Haitian police has diminished, their recent [retaking of control of the airport](#) a rare exception and only then with the help of the army. A tepid international response is underway, as the United States and the Caribbean Community of regional countries together sought a diplomatic solution, alongside a U.S. push for [Kenya to lead a very small international security mission](#), and which now aims to support the new government. Haitians are understandably skeptical, yet hopeful it will make a difference. But for the response to be adequate to the challenge, the effort will have to mobilize Haitian society on a level never before seen.

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To date, Haiti’s business and political class have focused on their own security, often to the detriment of society at large, while average citizens were never allowed an opening for involvement of any kind. Going forward, that will have to change as the country designs a counter-gang strategy that will allow the country to restore security. Such a strategy will require a surge of new security forces that can push back the gangs, a massive program for gang diversion and disarmament, a temporary judicial and penal arrangement allowing for secure incarceration, and well-financed and supported programs for citizen engagement.

While there are pieces of each of these in the works, none are serious efforts in their current iterations, and all lack the funding to succeed. Without an adequate response from both the international community and Haitian elites, there is every indication that Haiti will not only continue to slip further into violent chaos, but the very real possibility that any hint of governance could disappear, leaving not only a fragile state affecting all Haitians but a failed state on America’s doorstep.

A Comprehensive Counter-Gang Strategy

One of the first tasks of the newly formed Transitional Council and [newly appointed Prime Minister Garry Conille](#) and his cabinet will be to develop a comprehensive counter-gang strategy that addresses the immediate requirements for restoring security, while directing resources and attention to the root causes of gang

proliferation and violence. The development of a strategy will naturally fall to a National Security Council of Haitian officials and experts who are supported and advised by international experts, academics and practitioners who can bring in other successful cases of countering violent non-state actors. The advice of local communities should be a part of any planning, as they bear the brunt of gang depredations, and no solution can be effective without their advice and buy in.

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The first element in such a plan will be to immediately begin shifting the balance of force away from the gangs and toward the legitimate security forces. The arrival of the Kenyan-led Multinational Security Support Mission (MSS) will be the first step in this shift, as they will have greater capacity and mobility than the Haitian National Police (HNP) that they ultimately will be supporting. But they also will arrive with real deficits — not speaking the language or knowing the local communities, to start. And the size of the force, when compared with the task at hand, is [small](#). The MSS will need to partner from the start with the current HNP, as the international community supports a surge of new Haitian security forces who can not only confront gangs but begin to hold and control territory. And the international force will need to use a host

of enablers — drones, air support and superior intelligence to guide the actions of rapid reaction forces supporting fixed security units.

How the gangs will react to a fresh infusion of force is not clear. They could melt away or decamp from Port-au-Prince and wait the new force out. Some gangs could at the same time begin a kind of guerrilla war, sniping from the sidelines while still controlling neighborhoods and terrorizing the population. Some Haitian security experts believe the arrest of a handful of gang leaders will be key. All of this will hinge on a well-established but dynamic strategy that can be quickly adapted to changing circumstances and opportunities. But the early message needs to be clear to gangs — that their days of running the capital are over.

A Properly Tiered, Adequate Security Force

The current HNP, especially U.S.-trained and equipped SWAT units, [has held up in many engagements with gangs](#) much better than anyone expected and there is much to build upon there. But they are far too small for the task at hand, as shown in a recent [horrific attack on an HNP contingent](#) that resulted in the burning deaths of three officers. They can engage gangs and sporadically protect, but they are simply not designed to “hold” territory as will be required. Meanwhile, the Haitian Army has been left largely on the sidelines, the airport operation being an exception.

One of the problems Haiti has faced over the past three decades of democratic rule, alongside many other countries in the hemisphere, is that its security forces were not designed for the threats that emerged. Part of this was overcompensation for the oppressive security forces that were a part of the dictatorial years, part of it was underinvestment, and part simply a lack of good planning and organization.

Going forward, as part of the above national security planning, Haiti will need to redesign its security forces to include the army. The revised approach should ensure that communities are secured by lightly armed community police officers who are

backed up by heavier units, who are themselves backed up, *in extremis*, by forces that can respond to gang surges. The revamped force will need special units for crowd control and a full array of investigators backed up by forensics labs and other technical means. It will need mobility on the ground and in the air, and the capacity to conduct surveillance by air using drones and by other means.

All of this will require time and will be expensive, but to a certain extent it can be done incrementally if it can be matched in the meantime — and hopefully over the long term as well — by “force multipliers.” Those could include strong civic action programs that build support for the government, including by ensuring accountability, while reducing the strength of the gangs. The balance of force then could shift quickly in Haiti — for the better this time.

Comprehensive Gang Diversion and Disarmament

The question of whether to negotiate with gangs has been brewing for months, with some Haitians and international experts arguing there is simply no alternative given their relative strength, while others contend any political validation of the gangs would forever taint the provisional government. A middle ground would be to differentiate the patronage networks and gang leadership from the foot soldiers. Talks would be conducted fairly, respectfully, and aimed at finding a way forward for many of the foot soldiers, while gang leaders and their patrons would, at the very least, be prevented from violently forcing their way into government.

The way forward for former gang members will presumably be in line with what has been done with violent non-state actors in dozens of similar cases in other countries: they will be given the option to demobilize and some vocational training for a new life contributing to society rather than terrorizing it. In Haiti’s case this will need to include some way they can give back to their communities — a jobs corps in which they are

active in environmental or urban restoration is often met with a positive response [by Haitian civil society](#), a kind of restorative justice.

As with all cases of transitional or restorative justice — the peace process in Colombia is one recent example — it will be tricky to manage this without giving too much away and leaving many Haitians wondering why those who brutalize society are rewarded more than those who have helped their communities consistently. And any program will also need to be coupled with a disarmament program to remove as many weapons as possible from anyone not authorized to use them. Communications surrounding these programs will be critical, including making clear to gang members that they must make a clear choice: demobilization or prison.

To create the preconditions necessary for communities to consider reintegrating demobilized gang members, gang patronage networks in addition to leaders must be held to account for directing and enabling the brutalization of the Haitian population. If security forces fixate on taking down the most prominent public faces of the gangs — leaders like the infamous Barbecue, Vitel’Homme and Izo — and fail to target the patrons who sustain the gangs through direction, intelligence, weapons and equipment, then the gang strategy and any efforts at disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) will fail. Haiti has long been plagued by elite actors terrorizing the population through private security forces to maintain power — from the Tonton Macoute to the Chimères to today’s gangs. A gang strategy must strike at the root of this dynamic, investigating and prosecuting the patronage network. Failure to do so will lead the Haitian people to largely reject DDR programs and pose the threat of a continuing cycle of violence.

A Temporary Justice System

Haiti also will need a temporary justice and prison system that can work alongside a newly empowered Haitian security force to ensure a two-fold outcome: that the alternative of prosecution and incarceration for those who refuse to accept

demobilization can be carried out, and that patronage networks are dismantled. Haiti's justice system has never been adequate to the task of trying and convicting criminals.

Haiti's justice system has made tremendous strides over the past two decades and the country has the legal framework to try, sentence and incarcerate offenders, but it falls down in the tasks of administration of justice and the routine things such as case management. While the court system has received continuous assistance from international donors, the penal system has received very little. Both will need large-scale emergency assistance now, especially given the number of [prisons that gangs have destroyed](#) over the past months.

Real Citizen Involvement

The real tragedy of Haiti since the restoration of democracy has been the untapped potential of its citizens. That has been particularly acute on security issues, and going forward, especially given the paltry size of both the international force and the Haitian security forces, citizens will need to be empowered to do more, and all indications are that they are more than prepared to play such a role.

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The Transitional Council has [provisions](#) for engagement with communities and with regions in the form of roundtables, and there is even a nod to a [national dialogue](#). Whatever form the council and the Cabinet's engagement with communities takes, it should begin with the most important issue of security and glean from citizens their views on how to best restore security in their communities. Women, displaced people, and youth should be prominent in these discussions, as the main victims of the violence and undoubtedly holding valuable ideas for solutions. Their views should reflect prominently and consistently in the plans made at the national level, and the results of the dialogues should be clearly communicated to the country.

But beyond the national-level dialogues, community-level [justice and security dialogues](#) could be valuable. Such mechanisms, piloted by our organization, the U.S. Institute of Peace, in Africa, bring a broad range of local leaders and residents together to chart strategy and develop solutions to security issues. Participants include officials, civil society representatives, the business community, educators, women, youth, and religious leaders.

These dialogues can be helpful in guiding the services of all government ministries in communities, not just on security, a key issue in Haiti where government responsiveness to communities has been historically weak. If the government is able to better provide services in education, health and development, popular support for the government will grow and security will be enhanced.

Conclusion

The fundamental purpose of a strategy to curb the gangs should be to guarantee Haitians the ability to exercise their fundamental rights to free movement, medical care, education, employment and civic participation. Achieving this from such a deep deficit will require a holistic approach, integrating security measures with social and economic interventions that address root causes of gang proliferation and violence.

Ultimately, the strategy must aim to rebuild trust within communities, ensure the protection of human rights, and lay the groundwork for long-term peace and stability in Haiti. In so doing, it will tackle the immediate challenges posed by gang violence while rebuilding a foundation for a resilient and thriving society where all Haitians can pursue opportunities for growth and prosperity without fear.

This article was originally [published by Just Security](#).

PHOTO: A police checkpoint in Port-au-Prince, Haiti on Oct. 20, 2021. (Adriana Zehbrauskas/The New York Times)

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