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The world is tired of nation building in Haiti

By **Colum Lynch** // 01 March 2023

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UN

Haiti



People take part in a protest demanding the resignation of Haiti's Prime Minister Ariel Henry after weeks of shortages, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on Oct. 10, 2022. Photo by: Ralph Tedy Erol / Reuters

A months long campaign by Haiti's leadership and the United Nations to persuade the United States, Canada, or any other regional power to lead an international force to quell a coalition of street gangs has largely run aground, fueling fears that the country could spiral deeper into chaos, according to U.N.-based diplomats.

"Nothing is moving in the council; no one has the appetite for putting troops or police

in harm's way," one senior security council diplomat told Devex. "There is a Haiti fatigue; that is why everyone is so hesitant."

The stalled peacekeeping push comes more than four months after the Biden administration delivered an urgent appeal to the U.N. Security Council to impose a raft of sanctions on Haiti's gangs, and stand up an "international security assistance mission to help improve the security situation and enable the flow of desperately needed humanitarian aid."

"Haiti has come to us in a time of need," United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, told the 15-nation security body in an Oct. 17 emergency session. "It is our responsibility to come together to help restore peace and security for the people of Haiti."

Four days later, the council adopted a resolution, drafted jointly by the U.S. and Mexico, to impose financial, arms, and travel sanctions against gang members responsible for atrocities in Haiti.

But the U.S. push to deploy an international force is in limbo.

Washington has withheld the introduction of a second draft resolution creating an international security force because it is unwilling to lead operations and has been unable to secure another country to do it. Meanwhile, Russia, which has veto power in the 15-nation council, has telegraphed its reservations, hosting a council briefing by an activist who opposes foreign intervention.

"We have doubts that the option of sending an international military force could fundamentally change the situation," Russia's U.N. ambassador Vasily Nebenzya told the council in October.

There is nothing for Haiti

The reluctance to send foreign troops to Haiti reflects a deepening skepticism in Washington, Ottawa, and other donor capitals that the lowest-income nation in the Western Hemisphere can prosper, even with billions of dollars of foreign aid and security support. It also dredges up bad memories among Haitians about the troubled U.N. peacekeeping mission, whose blue helmets introduced cholera into Haiti and became embroiled in a series of sexual exploitation scandals.

The gloomy mood marks a sharp contrast to the ambitions of government

policymakers, the U.N., and development champions voiced after the devastating 2010 Haitian earthquake, which left more than 200,000 people dead and destroyed much of Port-au-Prince's infrastructure, including the Presidential Palace.

At the time, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former President Bill Clinton, who honeymooned in Haiti, helped galvanize considerable amounts of international donations and investments. The international community, led by the U.S. and the U.N., pledged more than \$13 billion in humanitarian, recovery, and development funds. For many Haitians, that investment never translated into meaningful changes for the country's most needy people.

Today, Haiti is in an even worse state, existing in a political vacuum with an unelected leader, a parliament whose lawmakers mandate expired, and no clear path to elections. "There is not one elected official left in the country," U.N. Special Representative for Haiti Helen La Lime told the council in January.

But Haiti has struggled to gain public attention at a time when Washington and other key Western donors are preoccupied with tackling other international crises, including the war in Ukraine and a series of earthquakes in Syria and Turkey that have left tens of thousands dead. Some observers say that nothing short of a major refugee crisis could alter Washington's political calculus on Haiti, and force a review of Washington's refusal to send U.S. troops into Haiti.

The U.S. and Canadian approach, according to the senior council diplomat, appears to boil down to wishful thinking: "They hope this problem goes away," the diplomat, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told Devex. "The big question is: if there is another flareup you're going to have people fleeing in large numbers. Do you wait till that happens or try to bring some stability now."

A president's murder

The assassination of Haitian President Jovenal Moïse on July 7, 2021, has pitched the nation deeper into a political, security, and humanitarian crisis. Opposition groups and a wide swath of civil society organizations have contested the legitimacy of Moïse's handpicked prime minister, Ariel Henry, who has served as the country's de facto leader since shortly after the murder but has moved slowly to pave the way for elections. The terms of the country's remaining lawmakers expired in January, effectively leaving Haiti without a single political leader with a popular mandate.

Haiti's politics has been reduced to a "kleptocratic machine against the rest of the country," Brian Concannon, executive director of the Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti, told Devex. He voiced misgivings about the virtue of deploying foreign forces in a country without a constitutionally recognized leader. International support for "an undemocratic government is not going to advance Haiti's democratic governance," he said.

Raymond Joseph, who served as Haiti's ambassador to the U.S. during the 2010 earthquake, faults Haiti's political leadership for squandering the opportunity to rebuild.

"They have just gone and grabbed that money and disappeared with it, and there is nothing for Haiti," Joseph said. "So, today, when Haiti is in dire need of help a lot of people are saying 'I don't know if I want to get involved in all of that.'"

Haiti's catalog of grief

The political crisis comes at a time when Haiti is enduring an acute humanitarian and security crisis.

Five million people face acute hunger. Cholera has returned to Haiti with a vengeance. Gang violence has reached levels not seen in decades, according to La Lime. In 2022, Haiti counted some 1,359 kidnappings, double the number of the previous year, and billions of dollars invested in Haiti since the 2010 earthquake have done little to get the country back on its feet.

"The violence is part of well-defined strategies designed to subjugate populations and expand territorial control," La Lime told the council in January. "Gangs have increasingly resorted to the deliberate killing of men, women and children — some of them as young as 10-years-old being brutally raped — as a tactic to spread fear and destroy the social fabric of communities under the control of rival gangs. Besieging and displacing whole populations already living in extreme poverty, gangs have intentionally blocked access to food, water and, amid a cholera outbreak, health services."

Some small Caribbean countries, including Bahamas and Jamaica, are committed to or considering participating in a multinational force, but no major regional power capacity to lead has stepped forward. Ralph Gonsalves, the prime minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, raised concern that an international force might be seen as serving to "prop up" a government that lacks electoral legitimacy.

There are sharply conflicting views on whether the Haitian people would welcome a foreign force. La Lime told the council in January that “Haitians overwhelmingly want” international forces to deploy in Haiti to support the national police.

Kim Ives, the American editor of the publication *Haiti Libertie*, who was invited to address the council at a session initiated by Russia, said Haitians “are almost universally opposed to any more United Nations interventions, with the exception of Haiti’s tiny bourgeoisie.

Jessica Hsu, an anthropologist based in Port-au-Prince, says that there is a disconnect between some politically active civil society groups, who largely oppose intervention, and a large part of the general population, which sees foreign intervention as the only hope of providing some respite from violence.

“The majority of people who want an intervention do not have hope in any government improving their lives,” Hsu said. “Many people have told me that they do not trust the Haitian state, that it’s been absent, negligent and even exploitative.”

In response to concerns that civilians would be caught in the crossfire in a street battle between the gangs and foreign forces, she added, many Haitians living in neighborhoods with armed groups counter: “‘We are collateral damage right now, and we are also being targeted.’ They would say ‘We just need to breathe.’”

No appetite for occupation

The Biden administration has made it clear that while it believes military intervention is necessary to restore security in Haiti, it has no appetite for leading the force itself. Brazil, which has experience battling urban gangs at home and during its tenure leading a U.N. peacekeeping mission in Haiti, has also signaled it isn’t interested.

In 2004, Brazil agreed to lead the U.N. Stabilization Mission in Haiti, a post that gave it experience in battling Haiti’s street gangs. But it also deepened Brazil’s belief that security was not enough to resolve Haiti’s deeper socio-economic problems.

The situation in Haiti, Brazilian general Jorge Felix confided to American officials six years later, “is too difficult to improve,” according to a February 2010 Wikileaks cable. Brazil’s support for Haiti “has not improved the situation on the ground” nor “taken Haitians out of the misery they live in,” Felix said.

The U.S. has pressed Canada, which maintains close ties with Haiti, to do it. But Canada isn't having it.

"We need to learn from the history of large outside military interventions in Haiti because they actually failed to bring about long-term stability for Haitians," Canada's U.N. Ambassador Bob Rae told the security council on Jan. 24, 2023. "Canada believes profoundly that all the solutions we look to must be led by Haitians and Haitian institutions."

Rae led a diplomatic mission to Haiti in December in an effort to promote a political process leading to elections.

In recent months, Canada has sought other outlets for helping Haiti, offering humanitarian assistance, police training, and intelligence support to the Haitian National Police. Last month, Canada dispatched its C-140 Aurora spy plane to surveil and assess Haitian gang activities.

During a summit of Caribbean governments, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced plans to redirect Canadian navy vessels, participating in a U.S.-led Caribbean anti-narcotics operation, to Haiti waters to collect further intelligence on the gangs. Canada and the U.S. have targeted dozens of gang members and political figures with sanctions.

"The toll of human suffering in Haiti weighs heavily on me," Trudeau said. But he made no commitment to deploy Canadian security forces inside Haiti.

Sanctions are a fig leaf

Walter Dorn, professor of defence studies at the Royal Military College of Canada, or RMC, and the Canadian Forces College, or CFC, said "there is huge resistance in the Canadian Armed Forces to lead an intervention in Haiti."

Dorn acknowledges there are good reasons for caution, noting that "gang warfare is not something that Canada has a lot of experience doing."

"Do you really want to have Canadian troops fighting gangs?" he said.

But the situation is so dire in Haiti that the steps Canada is undertaking are woefully inadequate, Dorn said. "Sanctions is really a fig leaf to cover the lack of willingness to do something that's needed to be done to save those people."

“I think there is a humanitarian imperative for intervention, and that we should definitely try it. If someone is drowning in the water and you can attempt a rescue you have an obligation to make that attempt rather than shrug your shoulders and walk away,” he added.

Geneviève Tremblay, spokesperson for Canada’s Global Affairs, challenged criticism that it was not doing enough in Haiti.

“We have delivered vital Haitian government-purchased security equipment to the Haitian National Police, in addition to nearly [100 million Canadian dollars] in aid to Haiti in 2022,” she said in a written statement, noting that Canada had already allocated another 12.3 million Canadian dollars in humanitarian aid this year. “We have also imposed severe sanctions on the political and economic elites who support and profit from the illegal activities of armed criminal gangs currently terrorizing the Haitian people.”

“Applying this kind of pressure on the political and economic elite of the country — who have been supporting the activities of criminal gangs and depleting the country’s resources through corruption — may eventually pave the way for political dialogue,” she added.

A history of foreign occupation

The current crisis in Haiti is set against a backdrop of more than a century of troubled U.S. and U.N. interventions in the Caribbean nation. The prospect of intervention is fraught for Haitians.

The former French colony has been occupied by U.S. forces three times since President Woodrow Wilson dispatched marines to Haiti in 1915 to restore order after the assassination of its then-president and seized control of Haiti’s treasury. They didn’t leave until 1934.

President Clinton ordered U.S. troops to Haiti in July 1994 to reverse a 1991 military coup and restore power to President Jean Bertrand-Aristide. And in February 2004, President George W. Bush sent troops to restore order, nudging Bertrand-Aristide to leave the country.

The latest effort to send international forces to Haiti gained traction after the country’s de facto president, Henry, requested a multinational force on Oct. 7.

Days after the president's murder, diplomats from a coalition of foreign powers, including Canada and the United States, announced public support for Henry as the country's prime minister. The move fostered protests from civil society groups, who contend that Henry lacks a popular mandate. Many suspect that his appeal for an international intervention force is aimed at consolidating his own power in Haiti.

Henry is reported to have links to a suspect in the assassination of the former president. He fired a prosecutor and judge who were investigating allegations that he communicated with the suspect after the assassination.

Some analysts have criticized the decision of the U.S. and other key powers to recognize Henry, claiming that he lacks legitimacy and that he is a product of a political machine that stymied Haiti's political and economic development.

"You have an international community that still believes it can save the existing system. You can keep Henry, you can have an election and you can get things back on track," Jake Johnston, senior research associate at the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, D.C. "My analysis is that the strategy for getting the train back on track is fundamentally flawed, that it is not a foundation that can be built upon, and you need to do something new and different."

Haiti, according to Johnston, is an inflection point that marks the end of a decades-long experiment in democracy dating back to the fall of the dictatorships of François Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude Duvalier, who ruled Haiti for nearly 30 years. "It is basically the end of a governance and transition to something new. In a sense, thirty years of democracy have largely failed and in its collapse there is an opportunity to build something new."

Richard Gowan, a U.N. expert with the International Crisis Group, said the Biden administration is "seriously concerned" about the crisis escalating and sending an increasing number of refugees into the U.S.

"The real challenge is straightforward; it's been impossible to find anyone who wants to go into Haiti," noting that the gangs are better armed than they were in previous battles. "The lesson everyone has taken from multilateral engagements in Haiti since the 1990s is you can always get in, but it's hellishly difficult to get out."

The most obvious candidates to lead, the Canadians and the Brazilians, "are very, very weary about entering into a multiyear commitment in a situation with nasty gangs and no clear political pathway to stabilizing the country."

Update, March 1, 2023: This article has been updated with extra reporting and to reflect a response from the Canadian government.

About the author

Colum Lynch is an award-winning reporter and Senior Global Reporter for Devex. He covers the intersection of development, diplomacy, and humanitarian relief at the United Nations and beyond. Prior to Devex, Lynch reported on foreign policy and national security for *Foreign Policy Magazine* and the *Washington Post*. Lynch was awarded the 2011 National Magazine Award for digital reporting for his blog Turtle Bay. He has also won an award for groundbreaking reporting on the U.N.'s failure to protect civilians in Darfur.

