



# Locked in Transition: Politics and Violence in Haiti

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PREVENTING WAR. SHAPING PEACE.

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# Principal Findings

**What's new?** A violent siege of Haiti's capital in early 2024 triggered the creation of a transitional government and the eventual arrival of a Kenyan-led mission to help counter the gang threat. But infighting has paralysed the government, empowered the gangs and made it unlikely that planned elections can come off safely.

**Why does it matter?** Haiti urgently needs a legitimate government able to lead the campaign to curb gang violence and respond to the country's dire humanitarian emergency. But holding polls prematurely could backfire, allowing gangs to play a deciding role in the vote and entrenching their power.

**What should be done?** Haiti's transitional authorities should strive to overcome internal wrangling and chart a realistic path to safe elections and constitutional reform. With future U.S. funding in doubt, the UN Security Council must find a way to support either the existing international security force or a peacekeeping mission to weaken the gangs.

## *Executive Summary*

Efforts by Haitian politicians and their foreign partners to quell surging gang violence have yet to bear fruit. A transitional government drawn from the country's main political forces took office in April 2024, promising to hold the first elections in nearly a decade. Soon thereafter, the first contingent of Kenyan police disembarked, part of an international security mission tasked with loosening the gangs' stranglehold on the capital Port-au-Prince and its vicinity. But the hopes invested by Haitians in the transitional government and the foreign mission remain unfulfilled. Partisan infighting and corruption allegations have prolonged political dysfunction. Violence rages, with gangs perpetrating some of the worst massacres ever as the understaffed, underfunded foreign mission struggles to rein them in. With safe elections looking improbable in the near term, transitional authorities should get past their internal disputes to plot a realistic course to polls and constitutional reform. The UN Security Council, for its part, must decide how best to respond to Haiti's request for support in fighting the gangs.

February 2024 saw a grim milestone in the gangs' growth but also the beginning of what seemed to be a concerted effort to stabilise Haiti. Instead of fighting one another, gangs banded together to mount a multi-pronged assault. Besieging Port-au-Prince, they cemented control of more than 80 per cent of the city, emptied jails, ransacked police stations and forced the airport to close. With Prime Minister Ariel Henry stranded in Kenya, where he had been negotiating deployment of the security support mission, the time was ripe for a bold response. Caribbean countries, the U.S. and other foreign states gathered Haiti's leading political forces for a summit in Jamaica on 11 March, prodding them to form a transitional government to take Henry's place. The idea was that with a new cross-party government promising a route to fresh elections, the country's leaders could arrest plummeting public trust in the state and the collapse of its institutions. In tandem, the foreign mission would arrive to join local police in beating back the gangs.

Marrying the goals of rebuilding legitimate government and restoring security, the plan was geared around leadership by a new Transitional Presidential Council, alongside a prime minister whom it would appoint. This arrangement, however, proved to be a seed of fresh strife. Council members clashed repeatedly with the first prime minister, Garry Conille, a long-time UN official. Conille's dismissal in November and replacement by businessman Alix Didier Fils-Aimé ended the impasse, while also sending a clear message that the council would run the show. But the wrangling did not stop. Council members are also at loggerheads with the political groups they are supposed to represent, known as the "sectors", which see the councillors' growing independence as a threat to their interests. Some parties are so affronted by their supposed loss of power that they have demanded a radical overhaul of government. Lastly, corruption charges against three councillors, who have refused to resign or cooperate with the authorities, have corroded the government's public standing.

To make matters worse, plans to push through constitutional reform, to be voted on at referendum in the first half of 2025, as well as hold elections before year's end, have made scant progress. Members of provisional electoral bodies were appointed only in December, and Haiti lacks an up-to-date voter register.

Moreover, polls held in current conditions would be unsafe for candidates and voters alike. Despite isolated achievements by police and the foreign mission in their campaign against the gangs, these groups control much of the capital and essential roads to the rest of the country, while fighting is expanding into other regions. In the past five months, gangs have carried out at least four massacres – carnage that has claimed around 400 lives. Staggering the voting schedule or placing polling stations outside gang-controlled territory could make balloting possible in some areas. But the result would likely be very low turnout, possibly under the 20 per cent witnessed in Haiti's last polls in 2016. Gangs could also sow fear in places under their sway to ensure that their allies win positions of power.

Instead of rushing toward elections, the transitional government should focus on the nuts and bolts of responsible governance. Drawing on the agreement that created the administration, it should establish an assembly where political groups represented in the Transitional Presidential Council can resolve their grievances without threatening to upend the state. The authorities should also act quickly to appoint a National Security Council and to provide the secretary of state for public security with the support required to map a strategy for reducing violence anchored in concrete, achievable steps. The government should also show it is serious about fighting corruption by ensuring that its members are held accountable.

Transitional authorities should work alongside foreign partners to explore how security assistance from abroad can be made more sustainable and effective. It is all the more crucial that they do so at a time when funding from the U.S., Haiti's main donor, has been partially frozen by the Trump administration, putting Washington's commitment to underwrite future security operations in serious doubt. Donations for the multinational mission have fallen far short of what was expected, and not all the promised 2,500 officers and materiel have arrived.

The UN could backstop the mission's financial and logistical needs along the lines of its support for African Union forces in Somalia, but it is unclear whether this approach would address all the current gaps in its operations.

The UN Security Council is also considering the possibility of turning the Kenyan-led force into a blue-helmet peacekeeping operation, as the Haitian government has requested, which would help address the mission's funding shortfall. Should the Council choose this option, the UN, in close coordination with Haitian authorities, should make the campaign to weaken gangs its priority and stand ready to follow up with support for state-building and development.

For almost three years following President Jovenel Moïse's assassination in July 2021, many Haitians cried out for a government that could build on broad public support to quell rising violence. The gang siege of Port-au-Prince appeared to mark a turning point. But Haiti's transitional government has been drawn toward battles of self-interest rather than the pursuit of safe polls. The country's new leaders should now rise to the occasion, working with foreign partners to stem the bloodshed that has tipped Haiti close to the breaking point.

**Port-au-Prince/Mexico City/New York/Brussels, 19 February 2025**

# Locked in Transition: Politics and Violence in Haiti

## I. Introduction

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The creation of a new transitional administration in March 2024 came with the promise that Haiti would finally have a legitimate, representative government. Following President Jovenel Moïse's assassination in the early hours of 7 July 2021, interim prime minister Ariel Henry had ruled for almost three years with the blessing of foreign powers but in the face of widespread public disapproval.<sup>1</sup> Street gangs – which had historically served as the armed wings of Haitian political and business elites – gained a firmer foothold over that period, their ranks growing to an estimated 12,000 as they expanded extortion, kidnapping and drug trafficking rackets. In the process, the criminal groups grew increasingly independent from their erstwhile masters, while tipping Haiti toward a violent breakdown. In 2024 alone, 5,600 people were killed, while over a million are displaced and nearly half the population do not know where their next meal is coming from.<sup>2</sup>

For two and a half years, Henry and opposition forces reluctantly engaged in unproductive negotiations in search of a more inclusive system of government. A more robust and broad-based administration was essential for many reasons, but curbing Haiti's growing violence was foremost among them. Haitians took to the streets frequently under Henry's government to rail against its failure to reduce the gangs' clout and demand his resignation.<sup>3</sup> In September 2022, gangs blocked the ports in the capital, Port-au-Prince, triggering shortages of fuel, clean water and food. In the wake of this siege, Henry made his first plea for UN assistance to restore Haiti's security.<sup>4</sup> But it was not until a year later that Kenya volunteered to lead a Multinational Security Support mission (MSS), which was authorised by the UN Security Council two months later.<sup>5</sup> Much of the delay in approving the mission and the reluc-

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<sup>1</sup> See Crisis Group Latin America & Caribbean Briefing N°49, *Haiti's Gangs: Can a Foreign Mission Break Their Stranglehold?*, 5 January 2024.

<sup>2</sup> "Haiti: Over 5,600 killed in gang violence in 2024, UN figures show", UN Human Rights Office, 7 January 2025; "Situation de déplacement en Haïti – Décembre 2024", International Organization for Migration, 14 January 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Crisis Group Latin America & Caribbean Briefing N°48, *Haiti's Last Resort: Gangs and the Prospect of Foreign Intervention*, 14 December 2022. See also "Thousands protest in Haiti over insecurity, rising costs", Al Jazeera, 22 August 2022; "Protests erupt across Haiti as demonstrators demand that the prime minister resign", AP, 5 February 2024; and "Gang violence is surging to unprecedented levels in Haiti, UN envoy says", AP, 25 January 2024.

<sup>4</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *Haiti's Last Resort: Gangs and the Prospect of Foreign Intervention*, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> "Security Council Authorizes Multinational Security Support Mission for Haiti for Initial Period of One Year, by Vote of 13 in Favour with 2 Abstentions", UN, 2 October 2023. The mission's mandate has two anchors: first, to support the Haitian National Police to "counter gangs and improve security conditions in Haiti", and secondly, to "build security conditions conducive to holding free and fair elections". "Resolution 2699", UNSC S/RES/2699, 2 October 2023.

tance to contribute police officers stemmed from the Henry government's unpopularity. Both Haitians and donors feared that foreign intervention would reinforce Henry's grip on power while impeding reforms that could bring about a more lasting solution to the country's turmoil.<sup>6</sup>

Despite Henry's imperviousness to pressure from his political opponents, alarm among Haiti's neighbours over soaring violence and possible spillover eventually brought his downfall. In February 2024, while he was in Nairobi to oversee the final details of the security mission's deployment, rival gangs that had formed an alliance called Viv Ansanm swept through much of the capital, shooting at police stations, government buildings and the airport, which was forced to close.<sup>7</sup>

With Henry unable to return to Haiti, member states of the Caribbean Community, the U.S. and other foreign powers called a summit in Jamaica on 11 March.<sup>8</sup> Assembling representatives of Haiti's most prominent social and political groups via videoconference, Caribbean and other foreign leaders urged them to establish a government reflecting the full spectrum of the country's political forces until elections could be safely held.<sup>9</sup> A Transitional Presidential Council composed of nine members – seven voting members appointed by leading political groups and the private sector, known in Haiti as “the sectors”, and two non-voting observers from civil society – was the result. Henry resigned on 24 April, following the council's installation.

Many observers were sceptical that such a disparate coalition could run a functioning government, but the hope was that casting a wide net would discourage would-be spoilers. In this way, as a politician told Crisis Group, “all [political and social] groups were in power and could keep each other in check”.<sup>10</sup> That said, limits to political inclusiveness were imposed: no one convicted or accused of a crime could become a member.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, efforts to ensure equal gender representation in state institu-

<sup>6</sup> The U.S. tried to convince Canada to assume the mission's lead, but Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Ottawa would not contemplate intervening when the government's authority was so weak and contested. He said Canada would await the support of more Haitian political parties. Crisis Group Briefing, *Haiti's Last Resort: Gangs and the Prospect of Foreign Intervention*, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> See Diego Da Rin, “Will a New Government Halt Haiti's Nosedive?”, Crisis Group Commentary, 21 March 2024.

<sup>8</sup> “Statement on Haiti by Chair of CARICOM, H.E. Dr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali”, Caribbean Community (CARICOM), 8 March 2024.

<sup>9</sup> The groups called to the Jamaica meeting include: the Collectif 30 Janvier (a coalition of eight political parties that includes the Parti Haïtien Tèt Kalè founded by former President Michel Martelly); the 21 December Accord (a coalition formed with a December 2022 agreement between Henry's government and other groups); the Engagés pour le Développement (EDE) (a party led by former Prime Minister Claude Joseph); the coalition Résistance Démocratique (RED) (created by supporters of former President Moïse, notably his cabinet secretary-general Rénald Lubérice); the Compromis Historique (an alliance led by Joseph Lambert and Youri Latortue, sanctioned by the U.S. and Canada for collaborating with gangs); the Fanmi Lavalas party (founded and led by former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide); the political party Pitit Desalin (led by left-wing politician Jean-Charles Moïse); representatives of the private sector; and the Montana Accord. The Montana Accord, initially a broad coalition of political parties and civil society organisations, has splintered. Its most prominent leaders are now the political representatives of its Monitoring Office. In the present negotiations, it is considered a political group.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group interview, political party leader, Port-au-Prince, 16 October 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Trying to curb corruption and consolidate the council's credibility, participants at the Jamaica meeting decided that the council could not include individuals charged with, accused of or convicted

tions were largely flouted: just one of the appointed councillors – a civil society representative who does not have a vote – is a woman.<sup>12</sup>

This report examines how Haiti's new transitional authorities have taken shape and how political jockeying over the last year has hindered efforts to restore security. It assesses how likely the transitional government is to achieve the goals it has set for itself – above all holding elections before the end of 2025 and reforming the constitution – and concludes with recommendations as to how Haiti's political forces and foreign governments could play a more productive role in stabilising the country. It is based on 232 interviews conducted between March 2024 and February 2025 with individuals in key roles in public administration, the private sector, diplomacy, security forces, civil society and communities in Port-au-Prince, New York, Nairobi and other capitals. Approximately one third of the interviews were with women, mostly representing civil society organisations. The vast majority of officials in the Haitian public administration, private sector, diplomatic corps and security forces are men, reflecting the gendered division of decision-making and security roles in the country.

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of a crime in any jurisdiction; under UN sanctions; or opposed to the multinational mission's deployment. "Outcome Declaration of CARICOM, International Partners and Haitian Stakeholders", CARICOM, 11 March 2024. These provisions were included, sources tell Crisis Group, to prevent gang members from being appointed to the council. Crisis Group telephone interviews, international and local facilitators, March 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Failing to invite women to take decision-making roles in the council is just one way that the body fails to recognise how violence has affected women and to make better use of the expertise of civil society and other leaders who are mediating with gang leaders and delivering essential aid to communities. Jessica Anania and Danielle Saint-Lôt, "Haiti's transitional council has a blind spot", *Foreign Policy*, 19 June 2024.



## II. The Transitional Government's Troubles

Despite widespread relief that Henry's term in office is over, many Haitians despair at the political bickering that has consumed the transitional government's attention and accounts in large part for its half-hearted efforts to remedy the country's dire security problems. Haiti still does not have a national security strategy mapping short and medium-term goals and how to achieve them.<sup>13</sup> Political deadlock has meant that a crucial post at the helm of the security apparatus was left vacant for almost nine months, while the institution in charge of coordinating security cooperation with donors remains dormant, as its members have not yet been appointed (see Section IV.B).<sup>14</sup>

Personalised politics, infighting and alleged corruption have done much to undermine the workings of the transitional administration. Although it was agreed that none of the individuals chosen to be part of the council would run in the next elections, the parties they represent all have, in the words of a diplomat, "a horse in the race" and hope to be able to influence important political decisions.<sup>15</sup> Participants also decided that the council would appoint a prime minister, but without defining precisely which of this person and the council would take which decisions.<sup>16</sup> These ambiguities quickly bedevilled the transitional government, contributing to a rapid succession of political crises.

The government's first six months saw frequent disputes between the presidential council and Garry Conille, then the prime minister. Conille, the U.S. embassy's favoured candidate, was chosen by consensus in late May.<sup>17</sup> According to sources privy to the discussions, Conille, who has a long career in humanitarian affairs and international cooperation and whose previous stint in politics had been brief, was viewed by Haitian politicians as a technocrat who would cause them little trouble.<sup>18</sup> Soon enough, however, tensions began to emerge. Conille, who has been described as strong-minded and obstinate, started quarrelling with the councillors.<sup>19</sup> With the division of responsi-

<sup>13</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Slipping the Leash: A Net Assessment of Haitian Gangs, Local Armed Actors, and the Multinational Security Support Mission", U.S. Institute of Peace, undated.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Port-au-Prince, October 2024; telephone interviews, January-February 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Port-au-Prince, 15 October 2024.

<sup>16</sup> According to the 1987 Haitian constitution, the president is head of state and the prime minister is head of government, responsible for overseeing day-to-day affairs and accountable to parliament for executing the government's plans. "Constitution of Haiti 1987 (rev. 2012)", accessible at "The World's Constitutions to Read, Search and Compare", Constitute.

<sup>17</sup> A post on X by the U.S. embassy in Haiti saying the council should select the prime minister based on the individual's "technical merit and impartiality" was seen as a clear nod to Conille. Crisis Group telephone interviews, individuals involved in the selection, May 2024; and Crisis Group interviews, Port-au-Prince, June 2024. See tweet by the U.S. Embassy in Haiti, @USEmbassyHaiti, 10:19am, 24 May 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Conille served as prime minister under Martelly between October 2011 and February 2012, but resigned following major disagreements with the president. "Haiti's prime minister resigns after four months", Reuters, 24 February 2012; "Haiti's Prime Minister Resigns", U.S. Institute of Peace, 28 February 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Sources privy to the exchanges between the prime minister and councillors said: "He looks down on them. He tells them: 'You are not my bosses. I have no duty of loyalty. You cannot dismiss me'". Crisis Group telephone interview, 10 November 2024.

bilities between the prime minister and the council unclear, the latter often accused Conille of challenging its authority.<sup>20</sup>

Tensions ran so high that both local and international mediators were brought in to tamp down hostilities. But on 8 November, all but one of the council members signed a resolution removing Conille from office and appointing businessman Alix Didier Fils-Aimé as his replacement.<sup>21</sup> Fils-Aimé's relations with the council have been far smoother.<sup>22</sup> Though questions about the legality of Conille's dismissal remain, the council emerged as the winner of the power struggle. The result, a politician told Crisis Group, was also a clear message to the new prime minister about "who is calling the shots".<sup>23</sup>

Despite coming out on top in the dispute with Conille, the council has itself been undermined by both allegations of corruption and rising tensions between its members and the groups that took part in the Jamaica summit. On 24 July 2024, the head of a state-owned bank accused three council members of demanding hefty bribes to let him remain in his position.<sup>24</sup> Despite calls for their resignation, from both outside and inside Haiti, including from the groups that nominated them, the council members in question have refused to step down.<sup>25</sup>

Even more threatening to Haiti's political stability is the dispute between the "sectors" and the councillors. The "sectors" signed what has become known as the 3 April agreement, which addresses questions left unresolved at the Jamaica meeting a month earlier, including the transitional government's full structure, the roles of various provisional bodies and the overall government plan.<sup>26</sup> This pact also aimed to make sure that the people sitting on the transitional council would behave in ways corresponding to the interests of the groups that appointed them.

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<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Port-au-Prince, June 2024.

<sup>21</sup> The current government, formed after the prime minister's replacement, includes only four women, the same as the previous cabinet. Conille's government had just fourteen ministers in total, however, as some oversaw two ministries, while Fils-Aimé's cabinet consists of eighteen members. The proportion of women has thus shrunk further, well below the quota set by a 2012 constitutional amendment, which mandates a minimum of 30 per cent women at all levels of administration.

<sup>22</sup> The new prime minister is the son of left-wing politician Alix "Boulon" Fils-Aimé. He previously served as president of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Haiti and the Chamber of Commerce of the West Department.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, politician, 14 November 2024.

<sup>24</sup> In a letter sent to Conille that was leaked to the press, the head of the National Credit Bank, Raoul Pascal Pierre-Louis, accused council members Louis Gérald Gilles, Smith Augustin and Emmanuel Vertilaire of demanding he pay them 100 million Haitian gourdes (approximately \$760,000) to keep his position.

<sup>25</sup> The council determined that the presidency would rotate every five months: councillors Edgard Leblanc, Smith Augustin, Leslie Voltaire and Louis Gérald Gilles were to assume the office in that order. In October 2024, however, as Leblanc's term was about to end, corruption allegations against Augustin – the next in line – and Gilles led the council to alter the order. Voltaire assumed the presidency, with Fritz Alphonse Jean now scheduled to take over in March 2025 and Laurent Saint-Cyr set to head the council from August 2025 to February 2026.

<sup>26</sup> The 3 April agreement also established an Oversight Body of Government Authority (known by its French acronym OCAG); a National Security Council; a Provisional Electoral Council; a Steering Committee in charge of organising a National Conference to help draft a new constitution; a Truth, Justice and Reparation Commission; and an Assembly of Sectors.

Most council members, however, quickly started distancing themselves from the groups that chose them.<sup>27</sup> The “sectors” are particularly aggrieved by how their expected role in negotiating important decisions, including the distribution of prominent posts in public administration, has been restricted.<sup>28</sup> In December 2024, leaders of some of these groups called on CARICOM to intervene, arguing that the presidential council’s decision-making disregards the 3 April agreement and that the councillors were acting exclusively out of self-interest, rather than taking into account the views of the political forces they are meant to represent.<sup>29</sup> In a meeting with representatives of the regional organisation, several members of the “sectors” called for the presidential council’s overhaul.<sup>30</sup>

Some of the groups sent a document to CARICOM outlining possible reforms to the council. One of these would replace the current council with a three-person panel comprised of a judge from the Court of Cassation (Haiti’s highest court), a politician and a civil society representative.<sup>31</sup> The proposal unleashed a political storm, pointing to new dividing lines between forces in the transitional government. Liné Balthazar, leader of the Parti Haïtien Tèt Kalè, said on public radio that the criminal alliance Viv Ansanm had been listed as a backer of this reform.<sup>32</sup> Many Haitians observers interpreted this revelation as a sign that the groups pressing for the reform were supportive of including gangs in some future, still undefined political arrangement. Their suspicions were shared by the current head of presidential council, Leslie Voltaire, who accused the signatories of the document sent to CARICOM of allying with the gangs for electoral advantage.<sup>33</sup> While some politicians acknowledge in private that informal

<sup>27</sup> As a result, the signatories amplified their demand that the 3 April agreement be published in the official gazette. Once published, the accord would have given these groups a legal basis for insisting that their representatives follow its terms. So far, however, the presidential council has declined to publish it. “Le BSA dénonce le décret du 27 mai du CPT: ‘Une trahison des engagements pris’, selon Jacques Ted Saint Dic”, *Le Nouvelliste*, 3 July 2024.

<sup>28</sup> The pact called for an Assembly of Sectors to be set up as soon as the agreement was signed, bringing together three representatives from each of the nine sectors to monitor compliance with the agreement and lead negotiations to consensus throughout the transitional period. This body has not yet formed. “Accord Politique pour une Transition Pacifique et Ordonnée”, Articles 46, 47, 3 April 2024.

<sup>29</sup> In a letter sent to CARICOM, the 21 December Accord, Collectif 30 Janvier, EDE, the RED coalition and Pitit Desalin accused the presidential council of trying “to entrench themselves in power at all costs, after two decades of electoral failures”, suggesting they would manipulate the electoral process in their favour. “Position des parties prenantes au consensus du 11 mars 2024 et signataires de l’accord du 3 avril 2024 sur la situation du pays”, 13 December 2024.

<sup>30</sup> “Devant les éminentes personnalités de la CARICOM, la plupart des signataires de l’accord fu 3 avril plaident pour la reconfiguration totale du CPT”, *Gazette Haïti*, 17 December 2024.

<sup>31</sup> “Trois secteurs ayant désigné des membres au CPT proposent plusieurs solutions de sortie de crise à la CARICOM”, *Le Nouvelliste*, 8 January 2024. The groups were the 21 December Accord, the Collectif 30 Janvier and the RED coalition.

<sup>32</sup> “Can Haiti’s gangs help solve the political crisis? Some politicians seem to think so”, *Miami Herald*, 10 January 2024.

<sup>33</sup> “Leslie Voltaire: ‘C’est scandaleux que des démocrates veulent composer avec la coalition des gangs Viv Ansanm’”, *Le Nouvelliste*, 13 January 2025. In the face of this backlash, other signatories of the proposals shared with CARICOM sought to demonstrate their rejection of political engagement with the gangs by sending a letter to the U.S. State Department demanding that Viv Ansanm be listed as a terrorist organisation. “Demandes d’inscription de l’organisation criminelle ‘VIV ANSANM’ sur

agreements with gangs will be needed when elections take place to ensure peace, the Haitian public is virulently opposed to this idea.

In the eyes of local and international observers, the rupture between the Transitional Presidential Council and important political and social groups has given rise to a serious danger: that “sectors” might reject the results of elections organised by the current authorities, plunging Haiti into a new cycle of instability.<sup>34</sup>

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la liste des organisations terroristes et de considération spéciale pour les Haïtiens bénéficiaires du programme ‘Humanitarian Parole’”, 21 December Accord/EDE, 24 January 2025.

<sup>34</sup> A UN official warned that growing political disputes are setting the stage for electoral unrest. “We have all the ingredients of electoral contestation”, he said. Crisis Group interview, Port-au-Prince, 19 October 2024.

### III. Reforming Haiti

The 3 April agreement lays out the ambitious agenda that the transitional government set for itself. Alongside its proclaimed goal of bringing security to the country, the government has focused its efforts on two issues: organising a general election and reforming the constitution, with a view to re-establishing a semblance of effective, legitimate governance after close to nine years without polls.<sup>35</sup>

#### A. The Road to Elections

The clock to organise a general election is ticking: the presidential council's mandate expires on 7 February 2026 and, in theory, it cannot be extended.<sup>36</sup> Although the transitional government has not yet published an official electoral timetable, the general election must be held by the end of 2025 in order for power to be handed over in time. Voltaire, current head of the presidential council, declared on 1 January that "like it or not, there will be elections at the end of this year".<sup>37</sup> But the chances of the vote happening on time were already slim when the new government was formed in April 2024, in light of the logistical and security challenges that Haiti's authorities face. In a 13 January report, the UN Secretary-General acknowledges that political discord in the transitional government makes reaching these goals even harder.<sup>38</sup>

Several critical benchmarks have not been met. There were delays in appointing the leadership of the Provisional Electoral Council (CEP), with all its nine members – including five men and four women – named only in December 2024.<sup>39</sup> Lack of

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<sup>35</sup> The 3 April agreement sets the following five primary goals for the transitional government: restore security; conduct general elections; organise a National Conference and a referendum to approve a constitutional reform; boost the economy, reconstruct public infrastructure and guarantee food security to all its citizens; and strengthen the justice system. Haiti's last vote was held in 2016. Elections were supposed to take place in late 2019, to choose parliamentarians and local authorities whose terms expired in January 2020. But political deadlock – manifested in disputes between the executive and Congress over ratifying a new prime minister and the national budget – and widespread protests decrying President Moïse's policies meant that voting was impossible. Elections were rescheduled for 2021, but Moïse's assassination in July that year plunged Haiti into a crisis that has prevented voting ever since. "Haïti – Bilan 2019: une catastrophe politique et économique", *Le Nouvelliste*, 16 December 2019; "Haiti elections postponed indefinitely amid political crisis", *Al Jazeera*, 28 September 2021.

<sup>36</sup> This timeline was established in the 3 April agreement and ratified by a legally binding decree on the presidential council's functioning. "Décret déterminant l'organisation et le mode de fonctionnement du Conseil présidentiel de transition", *Le Moniteur*, 27 May 2024.

<sup>37</sup> "1er janvier 2025: sécurité, élections et restitution de la dette de l'indépendance au menu du discours de Leslie Voltaire", *Gazette Haïti*, 1 January 2025.

<sup>38</sup> "There is a risk that the country could fail to complete the steps outlined in the governance arrangements agreed on 11 March 2024. Simply put, the goal of restoring democratic institutions by February 2026 is in jeopardy. Disagreements among authorities and stakeholders on power-sharing and ways to strengthen transitional governance have hindered progress". "United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti: Report of the Secretary-General", UNSC S/2025/28, 13 January 2025, p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> The presidential council called upon nine sectors – including religious groups, academics, unions and journalists, farmers and human rights organisations – to appoint a representative to join the CEP. Due to disputes within two of the sectors, only seven of the nine members were appointed by September 2024. The rest were named in December, following the nomination of the last two members. The process was criticised for lack of publicity and transparency. "CEP: des organisations de droits humains dénoncent un coup de force du CPT contre le secteur", *Vant Bèf Info*, 4 December 2024.

resources has also hindered the process. The CEP's technical director told Crisis Group that the pace of election preparations will hinge, among other things, on the funds allocated by the Haitian government and foreign donors.<sup>40</sup> Some experts have argued that the national budget for 2024-2025 does not earmark enough money for the electoral council, which has still not provided a clear estimate of how much the elections will cost.<sup>41</sup>

Now that the leadership of the provisional electoral authority has been appointed, it will have its work cut out for it addressing massive logistical challenges. Many of the electoral agency's technical staff, including senior managers, have left in recent years due to frequent delays in payment of salaries and worsening security conditions, meaning that new staff will have to be trained. With elections scheduled for the end of the year alongside a referendum on constitutional reform due to be held before then (see Section III.B below), the electoral authority will have to set up around 1,500 polling stations across the country and print ballots. It will also have to update the electoral register to remove from the rolls those who have died, add new voters and allow more than a million displaced persons to register at a polling station close to where they currently live. Another major challenge will be to enable Haitians living abroad to take part in elections for the first time, as the authorities have promised.<sup>42</sup>

The burning question, meanwhile, is how polls can be held in areas where gangs exert territorial control. During the 2016 elections, when gangs were far less strong than they are today, more than 9,000 Haitian police officers and 3,500 police and military personnel of the UN peacekeeping mission were deployed around the country to provide security.<sup>43</sup> Several officials assured Crisis Group that the next polls will be the most difficult to organise in decades.<sup>44</sup> Even if the national police and international forces receive financial and logistical support, it seems highly unlikely that gangs which have amassed so much power can be pushed back from most of the densely populated areas they hold in a few months. According to a Haitian electoral expert, the authorities would have a dilemma: "If we hold the elections in total chaos, there is a good chance that mafia groups in collusion with gangs will win the elections. But if we wait to solve the problem of insecurity before holding elections, we could be in for another four years".<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, Port-au-Prince, 19 October 2024.

<sup>41</sup> The cost of the forthcoming elections is estimated at \$90-120 million. So far, only \$45 million has been made available. Crisis Group interviews, CEP staff, UN officials and elections experts, Port-au-Prince, October 2024 and January 2025.

<sup>42</sup> The International Organization for Migration estimated in 2015 that 2.5 million Haitians were living abroad, but this number has likely risen, fuelled by a surge in emigration. For example, more than 200,000 Haitians migrated to the U.S. in less than two years under President Joe Biden's humanitarian parole program. President Donald Trump's order to eliminate this program in January means that its beneficiaries face the threat of immediate deportation. "L'OIM aidera le gouvernement haïtien à élaborer une politique migratoire", International Organization for Migration, 15 January 2015; "Parole program for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, Venezuelans continues. Trump wants it gone", *Miami Herald*, 14 January 2025; "Trump officials move to quickly expel migrants Biden allowed in temporarily", *The New York Times*, 23 January 2025.

<sup>43</sup> "Élection présidentielle et élections législatives partielles du 20 novembre 2016. Rapport final", Mission d'expertise électorale de l'Union européenne en Haïti, November 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interviews, CEP staff and electoral expert, Port-au-Prince, October 2024.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview, Port-au-Prince, 22 October 2024.

Gang control would make it difficult both to install polling stations and for citizens to venture out to vote freely for their preferred candidates. A resident of a gang-dominated area argues that “it is not possible to hold free elections with the gangs in control in these areas. They have enormous clout, control of the population, and politicians will use them to put pressure on people”.<sup>46</sup> Considering that some gang members have expressed interest in participating in political life, and that gang leader Jimmy “Barbecue” Chérizier has announced that the Viv Ansanm coalition is forming a party, it would be hard to prevent candidates with direct links to criminal groups from getting elected under these circumstances.<sup>47</sup>

Nearly a decade has passed since the last elections, however, and with mounting international pressure to hold long overdue polls, the government is considering several proposals to allow for voting in 2025. One option is to hold elections in phases by dividing the country into regions, starting with the safest areas. This approach would demonstrate a commitment to reviving the electoral process and allow security forces to focus on the regions where voting is taking place. But this alternative has a real downside: as the results of each phase are published, political parties at the bottom of the vote count could mount legal challenges to the process in an attempt to improve their position. The staggered release of results might also prompt gangs to intimidate leading candidates they dislike into leaving the race.

Other scenarios are also being entertained, but each has serious drawbacks. Gang-controlled areas could in theory be excluded from the elections altogether, although gangs now hold sway over 85 per cent of the capital as well as a large portion of the Artibonite department – two regions that together could contribute over half of the national vote.<sup>48</sup> A third strategy being considered is to set up polling stations outside gang-controlled areas, as was done in 2006. But there would be no guarantee that people living in these areas could vote safely, as the gangs have shown that they keep a tight leash on who enters and leaves their strongholds. A combination of these last two options nonetheless seems to be favoured by the current leader of the presidential council, Voltaire, who has suggested that people living in gang-controlled areas could vote in “free zones”, in effect excluding voting from taking place in swathes of the capital and the Artibonite region.<sup>49</sup>

Holding elections is without doubt a vital step toward restoring credible, legitimate government in Haiti. But moving ahead before the right conditions are in place risks empowering criminal groups and setting in motion a post-electoral crisis. Elections organised by a government that lacks public confidence in conditions of extreme insecurity could result in an even lower turnout than in 2016, when only around 20

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<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interview, Port-au-Prince, 24 October 2024.

<sup>47</sup> In pre-recorded videos shared on social media in January, Chérizier announced that the gang coalition was forming a political party and had already chosen representatives for the country’s ten departments and for the diaspora. TikTok video, @konbit.pou.lakay, 2 January 2024; TikTok video, @konbit.pou.lakay, 13 January 2024.

<sup>48</sup> Votes cast in the Ouest department – where Port-au-Prince is located – and the Artibonite department made up 54 per cent of the total in the 2016 elections. “Élection présidentielle et élections législatives partielles du 20 novembre 2016: Rapport final”, Mission d’expertise électorale de l’Union européenne en Haïti, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>49</sup> “En Haïti, les gangs sont en train de reculer sur certains fronts”, dit le président de transition”, France 24, 29 January 2025.

per cent of voters cast ballots.<sup>50</sup> Opinion polls carried out in early 2024 showed that less than 2 per cent of respondents have confidence in how elections are conducted in Haiti, and only 13 per cent were certain they would vote in the next polls.<sup>51</sup> Such low participation would most likely erode the legitimacy of any incoming government.<sup>52</sup>

## B. Constitutional Reform

The transitional government has also promised to draft a new constitution, which is to be submitted for approval in a referendum scheduled for May.<sup>53</sup> Experts in constitutional law have argued for almost three decades that the 1987 constitution, written after the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship, needs fundamental reforms that would foster more effective government.<sup>54</sup> Between 2009 and 2011, Congress passed a series of constitutional amendments, but a number of irregularities in the way it was done led many politicians and law scholars to argue that the changes were not legally valid.<sup>55</sup> A decade later, a commission appointed by Moïse produced a new draft constitution.<sup>56</sup> The text was shared with experts and representatives from across the country, but Moïse postponed the referendum scheduled for June 2021 after the UN political mission in Haiti, known as BINUH, and close political allies criticised the lack of inclusiveness and transparency in the drafting process.<sup>57</sup> Following Moïse's assassina-

<sup>50</sup> The official turnout for the 2016 presidential election was 21.09 per cent. "Élection présidentielle et élections législatives partielles du 20 novembre 2016. Rapport final", Mission d'expertise électorale de l'Union européenne en Haïti, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>51</sup> "Assessment of Citizen Needs and Understanding of the Political System in Haiti", Policité/ Internews, April 2024.

<sup>52</sup> In 2016, opposition politicians argued that the low turnout (there were just over a million votes in total, nearly half of which went to Moïse) was proof that the population had rejected the electoral process and used the results to question the president's legitimacy. "Haïti: À peine élu président, Jovenel Moïse déjà contesté", *Courrier International*, 2 December 2016; "Jovenel Moïse, un président haïtien à la légimité fragile", *Swissinfo*, 7 February 2017.

<sup>53</sup> On 30 December 2024, the CEP provided the government with a set of documents to begin preparations for the referendum. Although initial forecasts had aimed for a February or March vote, a draft electoral timetable schedules the referendum for May. Crisis Group interview, government official, Port-au-Prince, October 2024. See also "Le CEP prévoit d'organiser le referendum constitutionnel en mai de cette année", *Le Nouvelliste*, 3 January 2025.

<sup>54</sup> Jean-Claude Duvalier, known as "Baby Doc", inherited near total power after the death of his father François "Papa Doc" Duvalier in 1971. He was ousted in a popular uprising in February 1986.

<sup>55</sup> In 2011, the legislature passed a series of amendments, including the establishment of a permanent electoral council, a constitutional council and a 30 per cent quota for women's representation in the government, as well as allowing for the possibility of holding multiple citizenships. But the publication of the amendments was plagued by irregularities, including the lack of a Creole translation, leading many to consider the reform to be invalid. "Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti", UNSC S/2012/678, 31 August 2012, p. 2; "Sur la problématique de la Constitution haïtienne", Centre d'analyse et de recherche en droits de l'homme, January 2018.

<sup>56</sup> In October 2020, Moïse appointed a five-member commission led by former prime minister Boniface Alexandre with a mandate to draft a new constitution. "Investiture du comité consultatif indépendant pour l'élaboration du projet de la nouvelle Constitution", *Juno* 7, 31 October 2020.

<sup>57</sup> BINUH, which had been supporting the initiative since 2019, stated that the process "[was] not sufficiently inclusive, participatory or transparent" and that constitutional reform required the involvement of a wider range of political and social forces. Tweet by BINUH, @BINUH\_UN, 10:45am, 13 April 2021. "Constitution: lâché par plusieurs de ses proches, le texte mis en question par le BINUH,



tion, Henry vowed to pursue this effort, and the two political agreements signed during his term included constitutional reform as one of the government's main objectives.

Determined to lead this process to fruition, the presidential council appointed an eight-member Steering Committee in August 2024 – five men and three women – and gave them three months to draw up a new constitution.<sup>58</sup> Some of the changes that are being considered, such as setting equal terms of office for all elected officials, enjoy broad approval among Haitians.<sup>59</sup> Other issues are tied to more technical but equally critical discussions, such as reducing the number of local authorities and establishing a clearer allocation of responsibilities among decentralised authorities.<sup>60</sup>

More contentious issues being debated include the possible elimination of some safeguards that were established after the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship, with the aim of preventing the recurrence of authoritarian rule – notably, the 1987 constitution's move to strengthen Congress at the executive's expense. Critics of that constitution contend that these protections have contributed to the chronic weakness of successive governments.<sup>61</sup> Issues that are sure to be at the heart of constitutional debate include the model of government to be adopted (presidential, parliamentary or hybrid), the question of shifting from a bicameral to a unicameral legislature, and changes to the balance of power among the different branches of government.<sup>62</sup> Any overhaul could have immediate political repercussions: the post of prime minister could be replaced by a vice president, for example.<sup>63</sup>

To ensure the public can have a say in the final draft, the government promised to hold what it calls a National Conference: a consultation process for listening to citizens' proposals for a new charter.<sup>64</sup> The steering committee initially hoped to hold

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Jovenel Moïse s'accroche au référendum", *Le Nouvelliste*, 19 April 2021; "United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti: Report of the Secretary-General", UNSC S/2021/559, 11 June 2021, pp. 3-4.

<sup>58</sup> The steering committee is led by former Prime Minister Enex Jean-Charles.

<sup>59</sup> The 1987 constitution established different terms for various elected offices: five years for the president; six years for members of the Senate (a third of which has to be renewed every two years); and four years for lower house deputies and other local officials, resulting in elections every eighteen months. Logistical and financial challenges, coupled with political disputes, have repeatedly delayed polls in Haiti. As a result, the terms of elected officials frequently expire without elected replacements ready to step in, resulting in institutional paralysis or in governments operating in violation of the constitution.

<sup>60</sup> The 1987 constitution established a framework for decentralisation, creating three levels of local authorities: the commune (municipality), the section (a subdivision of communes) and the department (region). Each level is responsible for different administrative and developmental functions, but experts argue that there is significant overlap in their respective duties, leading to confusion. Crisis Group interviews, Port-au-Prince, October 2024.

<sup>61</sup> See Crisis Group Latin America & Caribbean Briefing N°44, *Haiti: A Path to Stability for a Nation in Shock*, 30 September 2021, pp. 9-10.

<sup>62</sup> "Décret portant création, organisation et fonctionnement de la Conférence nationale", *Le Moniteur*, 19 July 2024.

<sup>63</sup> The draft constitution prepared by the special commission established by President Moïse proposed establishing a presidential system, introducing a vice president elected by universal suffrage alongside the president and abolishing the role of prime minister. "Avant-projet – Constitution", Comité Consultatif Indépendant, January 2024, p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> Like the discussions of constitutional reform, the proposal of a national conference is not new. The transitional government led by interim president Boniface Alexandre proposed such a national dialogue to reconcile Haiti's divided society after the insurrection that forced President Jean-

consultations in Haiti's ten departments and in six cities abroad between November and December. Amid the turmoil over replacing the prime minister, and faced with daunting logistical challenges, lack of funds and security threats, those meetings were nevertheless postponed until late January and will probably continue through mid-February.<sup>65</sup> Rather than being a broad national dialogue of the sort that has underpinned constitutional reforms in other countries, these meetings have so far been brief consultations with small groups pre-selected by the steering committee.<sup>66</sup>

Once a new draft is prepared, the process to reform the constitution is destined to be equally thorny. According to the 1987 constitution, amendments to the charter can only be approved by Congress.<sup>67</sup> But as there is no legislature in place, the transitional government has proposed holding a referendum, despite an express constitutional prohibition of this procedure.<sup>68</sup> Even so, many prominent Haitian political figures as well as diplomats have openly supported a referendum, arguing that if legislators were to handle the process they might seek to obstruct it by demanding bribes to approve certain changes and opposing those that undermine their personal interests.<sup>69</sup> Critics of the referendum, on the other hand, say other worries are paramount. Reforming the charter in ways that are openly unconstitutional – especially when consultation on the content will have been limited and turnout for the plebiscite will likely have been low, due to insecurity – will result in a text that is not widely accepted as legitimate.<sup>70</sup>

Meanwhile, most Haitians have largely ignored the constitutional reform process, as they remain preoccupied with surviving the violence and feeding their families. The topic is almost absent from the mainstream press and social media, though officials told Crisis Group they were making efforts to raise public awareness. A working group established by the committee held discussions for three months with representatives from political parties, the private sector and civil society. In a report, the working group noted that most of the participants in the discussions recommended convening a constituent assembly, in addition to holding a referendum, to enhance the legitimacy of the exercise.<sup>71</sup> Those consulted also said high levels of political acrimony were inimical to an inclusive constitution-drafting process.<sup>72</sup>

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Bertrand Aristide into exile in 2004. See Crisis Group Latin America & Caribbean Briefing N°7, *Haiti's Transition: Hanging in the Balance*, 8 February 2005, pp. 9-10.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interviews, electoral council officials, Port-au-Prince, October 2024 and January-February 2025.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, government officials and electoral experts, October, January, February 2024.

<sup>67</sup> "Constitution de la République d'Haïti de 1987 amendée le 9 mai 2011", August 2012, art. 282-284.

<sup>68</sup> Haiti's parliament ceased holding sessions in January 2020, when the terms of all the deputies in the lower house and almost all the senators ended. The mandates of the ten remaining senators – the country's last elected officials – ended on 10 January 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, politicians and electoral experts, January 2024.

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rosy Auguste Ducena, human rights defender, Port-au-Prince, 25 June 2024.

<sup>71</sup> "Rapport Final – Ensemble des propositions reçues des secteurs organisés de la vie nationale", Groupe de Travail sur la Constitution, January 2025.

<sup>72</sup> In an open letter to this constitutional working group, EDE – which participated in the creation of the current government – contended that a presidential council entangled in a corruption scandal and refusing to act against those involved lacks the credibility to lead constitutional reform. Tweet by Les Engagés pour le Développement EDE, @edehaiti2021, 8:44am, 3 January 2024.

## IV. The Gang Threat and a Faltering Response

Violence has always followed the rhythms of politics in Haiti, and recent years have been no exception. After concerted attacks of unprecedented intensity that paralysed the capital for two months early in 2024, the gangs scaled down their offensive as the transitional government took its first steps and the initial contingents of the Multinational Security Support mission arrived in Haiti.<sup>73</sup> But as tensions rose within the government and the MSS ranks remained thinner than intended, the gangs went back onto the front foot, tightening their grip on Port-au-Prince and expanding into other parts of the country.

### A. *Turning Up the Violence*

February 2024 marked a dramatic shift in the pattern of violence in Haiti: after over three years of brutal confrontation with one another in jostling for territorial control, the gangs joined forces and launched simultaneous attacks on strategic locations in Port-au-Prince.<sup>74</sup> They attacked the city's international airport, the main ports, Haiti's two largest prisons, where they freed more than 4,700 inmates, over a dozen police facilities, hospitals, the presidential palace and other public buildings. Chérizier immediately claimed responsibility for the attacks, which he attributed to a new gang alliance called Viv Ansanm.

At a press conference during the siege, Chérizier tried to present the gang violence as part of a political mission. He announced that rival gangs were now teaming up to force Henry to step down as prime minister, the first phase in a self-proclaimed struggle to break Haiti's oligarchs' hold on power.<sup>75</sup> In the weeks that followed, the gangs opposed the process forming the government at the Jamaica summit and demanded to be involved in any effort to solve the political crisis.<sup>76</sup> The timing of the attacks appeared to be carefully chosen with another goal in mind: to create turmoil and so

<sup>73</sup> "The [gangs] are gearing up, waiting to see if the mission has really come to solve the problem or whether it has just come to create the minimum conditions for the elections", an expert on Haitian gangs told Crisis Group as the first Kenyan officers landed. Crisis Group interview, Port-au-Prince, June 2024.

<sup>74</sup> In mid-2020, nine prominent gang leaders formed a coalition they called G9 to assert dominance in metropolitan Port-au-Prince. In response, powerful gangs in the Cité Soleil slum who refused to join created another alliance, the Gpèp, and progressively started cooperating with other armed groups operating in and around Port-au-Prince to subdue the rival coalition. See Diego Da Rin, "New Gang Battle Lines Scar Haiti as Political Deadlock Persists", Crisis Group Commentary, 27 July 2022.

<sup>75</sup> The Viv Ansanm cooperation agreement first emerged in September 2023, when gang leaders in the capital declared they would stop fighting one another in a move widely seen as a response to UN Security Council negotiations over a resolution authorising the multinational mission. Although the gangs quickly started clashing again, a mediator showed evidence to Crisis Group that leaders continued to communicate in the ensuing months about the possibility of joining forces against a foreign security mission. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Haiti's Gangs: Can a Foreign Mission Break Their Stranglehold?*, op. cit.

<sup>76</sup> In an interview after the Jamaica meeting, Chérizier said the gangs had no representative on the presidential council. "As long as [they are not] at the table, the country [will] never be in peace". "Haiti gang leader will consider ceasefire but warns foreign forces will be treated as 'invaders'", Sky News, 29 March 2024.

thwart plans to deploy a foreign security force that could be more effective in curbing the gangs' power.

For a brief moment, the gangs seemed to have achieved their objective. Following Henry's resignation, Kenya put its plans to send paramilitary police to Haiti on hold, arguing that amid the complete breakdown of security it would wait for new authorities to be in place before deciding to move forward with the mission.<sup>77</sup> But the pause turned out to be brief. From the day the presidential council was sworn in, U.S. cargo and military planes delivering equipment and supplies for the mission's headquarters began landing daily, and civilian contractors arrived in Port-au-Prince to construct the mission's base.<sup>78</sup>

Local observers who were closely monitoring the evolution of the offensive assure Crisis Group that gang attacks dropped steeply after presidential council was inaugurated in late April 2024, with the gangs entering a wait-and-see phase. As preparations for the mission's arrival moved forward, the gangs retreated to their strongholds, where they destroyed police stations and other buildings that could be used by security forces to gain a foothold during any incursion into gang territory. The gangs' transition to a seemingly more defensive strategy in Port-au-Prince continued after the first MSS officers arrived. The criminal groups dug trenches, installed speed bumps on roads, moved large containers into position as barricades and built walls on some of the main access routes to their areas. Meanwhile, violence within gang strongholds persisted, with reports documenting a surge in sexual violence, especially against girls and women, following consolidation of the Viv Ansanm alliance in February.<sup>79</sup>

While gangs went on the defensive in the capital, however, they continued trying to firm up their foothold outside Port-au-Prince.<sup>80</sup> In early May 2024, members of the Grand Ravine gang invaded the town of Gressier, some 20km west of the capital, crucially extending their control of the road that connects the capital to the south of the country.<sup>81</sup> A few months later, the 400 Mawozo gang mounted attacks on Ganthier and threatened to take over Fonds Parisien, two towns located on the national road linking the capital to the Dominican Republic.<sup>82</sup> Between May and September, gangs also attacked Cabaret and Arcahaie – two towns north of the capital along a national road – and parts of the Artibonite department, such as the commune of Terre-Neuve.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>77</sup> "Kenya's government puts deployment of police to Haiti on hold after chaos grips the Caribbean nation", Associated Press, 12 March 2024.

<sup>78</sup> "Kenyan police officers preparing to deploy to Haiti, where preparations are under way", *Miami Herald*, 3 May 2024.

<sup>79</sup> "The Gender-Based Violence Crisis in Haiti", Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2024; "Haiti: Scarce Protection as Sexual Violence Escalates", Human Rights Watch, November 2024; "A Port-au-Prince, l'insuffisante prise en charge des victimes de violences sexuelles", press release, Médecins Sans Frontières, 13 January 2025.

<sup>80</sup> Renata Segura, Diego Da Rin, "Haiti's Window of Opportunity. What It Will Take to Stop Gang Violence and Promote Stability", *Foreign Affairs*, 29 August 2024.

<sup>81</sup> "Gressier: première ville qui tombe aux mains de bandits à l'ère du CPT", *Le Nouvelliste*, 13 May 2024.

<sup>82</sup> "Ganthier: la police n'y est pas, la population s'est enfuie, les bandits y règnent", *Le Nouvelliste*, 2 August 2024.

<sup>83</sup> "10 killed, one critically injured and eight homes burned by gangs in Haiti's Artibonite rural communities", *The Haitian Times*, 18 June 2024; "La PNH consolide sa présence à l'Arcahaie face à la menace des gangs", *Le National*, 7 August 2024.

## B. *The Struggles of Security Forces*

Emboldened by the apparent weakness of the Haitian security forces and the MSS, and exploiting the infighting that had distracted the government, gangs ramped up their attacks in October 2024. After threatening the population of the town of Pont-Sondé in the Artibonite department, north of Port-au-Prince, for collaborating with a self-defence group to stop an extortion scheme, the Grand Grif gang massacred more than 70 people there.<sup>84</sup>

A few days later, as disputes escalated between the prime minister and the presidential council, Guy Philippe, a figure with links to gangs and popular among certain sectors of the population, urged Haitians to go to the streets to bring down the government, calling on the gangs to join this campaign.<sup>85</sup> On 17 October, criminal groups launched simultaneous attacks in several parts of Port-au-Prince and other cities.<sup>86</sup> Violence rose as news of the presidential council's decision to oust Conille spread. In a TikTok video, Chérizier said Viv Ansanm's "observation period" was over and promised to overthrow the government.<sup>87</sup> Despite efforts by national security forces and the MSS to fend off attacks on several fronts, the gangs shot at three commercial airplanes, causing the airport to be shut down for a month (commercial airlines have yet to resume flights to the capital).<sup>88</sup> They have also been steadily expanding their hold on strategic areas of Port-au-Prince.

Haitians have watched with incredulity how violence has spread despite the presence of an international force they had hoped would clamp down on the gangs. Godfrey Otunge, the MSS commander, had expected to hit the ground running. Soon after the mission's first 200 officers disembarked in June 2024, he and the newly appointed Haitian police director, Normil Rameau, held a joint news conference in which Rameau pledged that, after a period of evaluation and planning, "any day now, people [would] wake up to see that operations have been carried out and bandits have been neutral-

<sup>84</sup> The exact number of victims of this gang assault remain unclear. Local officials claimed that over 100 were massacred, but UN agencies were only able to confirm the killing of about 70 people. "Gang attack in Haiti's Pont Sondé leaves 70 dead", UN News, 4 October 2024; "The death toll in a gang attack on a Haitian town rises to at least 115", Associated Press, 9 October 2024.

<sup>85</sup> Guy Philippe is a former police commander and coup-monger who had been deported to Haiti two months earlier after serving a six-year sentence in the United States for laundering drug profits. Philippe's call for a "peaceful revolution" and an end to the oligarchy found support on the streets in early 2024, when Henry was still prime minister. After laying low for some months following formation of the new transitional authorities, Guy Philippe reappeared in October, urging Haitians to overthrow the government by any means, including violence, and openly called on the gangs to back his movement. TikTok video, @mp.promo.4, 13 October 2024.

<sup>86</sup> October 17 commemorates the assassination of revolutionary leader Jean Jacques Dessalines, who proclaimed Haiti's independence in 1804, and is a date where Haitians often take to the streets to protest. Philippe, who opposes the Kenyan-led mission and is a vocal critic of foreign interference in Haiti's domestic politics, tried to re-launch an anti-government movement on this date, saying that it was time to overthrow a presidential council that he claims was engineered by foreign powers. "Tele Ginen: Guy Philippe nan tèt manifestasyon nan vil Jérémie jedi 17 octòb", video, YouTube, 17 October 2024.

<sup>87</sup> Since then, at least two TikTok accounts with thousands of followers used by Chérizier to post daily updates and broadcast long livestreams have been deleted by network administrators.

<sup>88</sup> "FAA bars US airlines from Haiti after gunfire hits three planes", Reuters, 12 November 2024.

ised”.<sup>89</sup> Otunge was intent on appearing busy while waiting for more reinforcements to arrive. By mid-July, mission personnel and the Haitian police started conducting joint patrols in central areas of Port-au-Prince that had been abandoned by the security forces for months.<sup>90</sup>

Together with the Haitian police, the mission began more aggressive operations to weaken the gangs in Port-au-Prince and halt the invasion of towns near the capital. In Gressier and Ganthier, these joint efforts succeeded in temporarily pushing back the advancing gangs, but neither the police nor the MSS had sufficient firepower and equipment to hold their positions in these areas.<sup>91</sup>

In late August 2024, they embarked on a campaign lasting several weeks in the capital’s neighbourhoods of Bel-Air and Delmas. Though they managed to push the gangs back in some areas and regain control of streets around the Solino neighbourhood and in downtown Port-au-Prince, they failed to retake a major portion of a gang stronghold or arrest an important gang leader, depriving themselves of a chance to claim battlefield victory. In late November, they managed to penetrate Chérizier’s stronghold in the Delmas 6 neighbourhood and reportedly destroyed the gang leader’s house, killing a dozen gang members and seizing some of their weapons.<sup>92</sup> Although they failed to take full control of the area, the police and MSS were able to establish a third forward operating base (earlier, they had set up one in the police academy in Port-au-Prince and one in Pont-Sondé after the massacre) in an abandoned police building in Delmas.<sup>93</sup>

But these turned out to be isolated advances. A massacre in the capital in early December 2024 demonstrated the stranglehold that gangs continued to exert in certain places. Between 6 and 11 December, gangs killed over 200 people, mostly senior citizens and Vodou practitioners, in Wharf Jérémie, a neighbourhood in Cité Soleil near the capital. The murders were ordered by gang leader Micanor Altès, who accused the elderly residents of being responsible for his son’s illness.<sup>94</sup> Two days after the slaughter began, as news of what was happening in the area leaked, the gang ordered

<sup>89</sup> “Radio Television Caraïbes: Rekreyasyon an fini, deklarasyon Rameau Normil nouvo DG PNH la”, video, YouTube, 9 July 2024. The mission also claimed to have taken control of the public hospital near the presidential palace, the largest in the capital, but some weeks later security forces had to provide covering fire for the prime minister’s convoy when it visited the hospital with journalists in tow. “Security forces protecting Haitian leader provide ‘cover’ fire after he leaves interview with CNN”, CNN, 30 July 2024. Gangs launched another deadly attack on the hospital on Christmas Day, killing at least two journalists and a police officer, stopping the health minister from reopening the facility. “A survivor of the worst gang attack on Haitian journalists says colleagues were cut down by bullets”, Associated Press, 25 December 2024.

<sup>90</sup> “Policiers haïtiens et kényans dans les rues de Port-au-Prince”, *Le Nouvelliste*, 17 July 2024.

<sup>91</sup> “Gangs fled a Haitian town as Kenya force moved in. But only for a day”, *Miami Herald*, 30 July 2024.

<sup>92</sup> “La Police nationale d’Haïti confirme la mort par balles de plusieurs bandits au bas de Delmas”, *Alterpresse*, 9 November 2024.

<sup>93</sup> The mission’s headquarters are in the Port-au-Prince airport compound, where the first contingents were hosted when they arrived. Since then, it has started opening what it calls “forward operating bases” – temporary, smaller outposts located to enable rapid deployment in critical areas. Crisis Group interviews, mission personnel, Port-au-Prince, October 2024.

<sup>94</sup> “Flash Report: 207 people executed by the Wharf Jérémie gang”, UN Human Rights Office/BINUH, 23 December 2024.

telephones to be seized, stopped people from leaving their homes and executed those suspected of providing information to the media.<sup>95</sup>

The mission's failure so far to meet Haitians' expectations can partly be explained by a lack of resources. According to the original plan, the force's personnel were to be deployed in phases from the first arrival of officers until the full capacity of 2,500 was reached by November 2024. But by year's end, only two Kenyan contingents totalling 383 police officers had arrived in Haiti, while Jamaica, Belize and the Bahamas had sent about 30 soldiers as advance teams to prepare for dispatching their own troops. New personnel from Kenya and Caribbean countries have subsequently joined the mission, increasing the total number of personnel to approximately one thousand.<sup>96</sup> These reinforcements should allow the mission to operate more effectively on various fronts. But even with the planned deployment of additional forces from Kenya and Caribbean countries that have pledged to send more, it seems unlikely that the mission will meet its goal of 2,500 troops any time soon.

Enmeshed in power struggles and distracted by political crises, meanwhile, the transitional government has failed to galvanise the anti-gang fight. A National Security Council, to be composed of security experts and charged with coordinating with international partners the use of foreign assistance to fight gangs, was due to have been established before the Kenya-led mission began deploying. But disagreements between the prime minister and the presidential council over this body's composition and mandate, particularly whether it should be purely advisory or have decision-making powers, occupied the government for months.<sup>97</sup> Attention was also seemingly diverted toward appointing positions with greater political influence ahead of elections. Presidential council members "are not at all focused on governance and have no security plan", a source close to the negotiations over the security council's composition said in 2024. "They say they want to set up the National Security Council, but they are focused on appointing their allies to ministerial posts".<sup>98</sup> In the end, the security council was established by decree at the end of December, but its members have yet to be appointed.

Similar delays affected the appointment of the secretary of state for public security, who is tasked with drafting a national security policy. Mario Andrésol, former head of the national police, was eventually appointed in January. Following a gang offensive later that month in the area around the city of Kenscoff, in the mountains overlooking the upscale district of Pétiion-Ville, Andrésol admitted to shortcomings in the authorities' approach to combating gangs.<sup>99</sup>

With the security forces unable to protect Haitians from gang predation, self-defence groups have proliferated in parts of Port-au-Prince and in other regions.

<sup>95</sup> "The horror continues in Wharf Jérémie", *Ayibo Post*, 13 December 2024.

<sup>96</sup> In early January, Guatemala deployed 150 military police and El Salvador sent 78 soldiers who will evacuate troops who have been wounded or require other medical attention. Kenya also deployed 361 paramilitaries between January and February, but some 256 new Kenyan officers and personnel from Caribbean countries have yet to arrive.

<sup>97</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, government official, 5 February 2025.

<sup>98</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 15 May 2024.

<sup>99</sup> "Attaque à Kenscoff: Mario Andrésol dénonce des défaillances mais assure que Rameau Normil n'est pas menacé", *Le Nouvelliste*, 31 January 2025.

Vigilante groups have existed in Haiti for decades, having been set up to defend urban neighbourhoods or rural villages from incursions by gangs or other armed bands. But today these brigades, made up almost entirely of young men, have multiplied and, in some cases, become increasingly well equipped. Their expansion began with the emergence of what has become known as the Bwa Kalè movement in April 2023, when civilians lynched over a dozen alleged gang members in a Port-au-Prince neighbourhood at risk of being overrun. That unleashed a wave of efforts by residents to form groups that could deter and counter gang activity.<sup>100</sup>

Some of these brigades are more organised and better armed than others. Many include police officers who live in the areas where they serve. These officers manage the distribution of weapons and ammunition and oversee the preparation of defensive measures.<sup>101</sup> Operating outside the state and with no accountability for any violent action they may undertake, these brigades have helped fill the gaps left by the failings of local security forces. A notable case was the Solino brigade, which had approximately 40 members – many of whom were police officers who lived in this part of the capital. This brigade fought off the gangs' advances for over a month before succumbing in November 2024.<sup>102</sup> The government has not explicitly encouraged vigilantism but has advocated for a "police-population partnership", implicitly condoning some form of collaboration with self-defence groups.<sup>103</sup>

Though the brigades have prevented violent incursions in many of the areas they defend, gangs have launched extremely brutal retaliatory attacks on communities protected by vigilantes. The October 2024 massacre committed by the Gran Grif gang in Pont-Sondé, along with ensuing clashes between self-defence groups and gangs there, underscored the risk of escalation between civilians and gangs, fuelling concerns that the conflict could descend into civil war.<sup>104</sup>

### C. *The Uncertain Future of Foreign Security Support*

Haitian leaders, together with U.S. diplomats, spent the second half of 2024 encouraging UN member states to contribute more funds and personnel to the multinational mission. But the additional financial support needed to bring the Kenyan-led operation up to full capacity has not arrived, while there are no guarantees that U.S. funding will continue, leaving the mission's future in doubt. A UN-managed trust fund created to receive the donations has \$110 million on hand to finance a mission that Kenya estimates costs \$600 million per year.

<sup>100</sup> See Diego Da Rin, "Haitians Turn to Mob Justice as the Gang Threat Festers", Crisis Group Commentary, 3 July 2024.

<sup>101</sup> Sources familiar with the inner workings of these brigades have told Crisis Group that some of the weapons and ammunition they use are taken from Haitian police stocks. The brigades also receive funds from residents and Haitians in the diaspora to buy equipment on the black market. Crisis Group interviews, June-July 2024.

<sup>102</sup> "Solino sous le contrôle des gangs, panique à Port-au-Prince", *Le Nouvelliste*, 14 November 2024.

<sup>103</sup> Former police director Frantz Elbé promoted such collaboration with the slogan *marriage police-population*, an approach that the current director, Normil Rameau, has also encouraged. Prominent human rights organisations, including the Réseau National de Défense des Droits Humains and Sant Karl Lévêque, have supported this tactical cooperation.

<sup>104</sup> "Haitian, Kenyan police took control of a rural town – then the victory led to carnage", *Miami Herald*, 13 December 2024.



The funding shortfall has unquestionably hindered the mission's early efforts: the mission is understaffed, as explained above, and also severely underequipped. Its needs are varied, officers in Port-au-Prince told Crisis Group, ranging from more ammunition and high-calibre weapons to helicopters and vessels that can curb rising gang activity at sea. Some of the mission's equipment is not fit for purpose: its bulky armoured vehicles, for example, cannot always squeeze through the narrow, winding alleys where much of the fighting in Port-au-Prince is taking place. As things stand, Haitian leaders and their international partners fear that the multinational force is not strong enough to ensure the Haitian police can weaken the gangs or stop their expansion into new areas.

This funding shortfall is exacerbated by a growing sense of uncertainty in Washington about the sustainability of U.S. contributions to the mission under the Trump administration. The U.S. has been the mission's main donor, having spent around \$600 million in the past year to help build its operational base, procure equipment and train its officers. Concerned that the U.S. might wind up bearing most of the mission's costs indefinitely, Republicans in Congress tried in 2024 to rein in the spending and appeared unwilling to make new appropriations.<sup>105</sup>

But the Trump administration's approach to Haiti remains ill defined. Domestic concerns loom large over policymaking: the administration could continue intervening forcefully to prevent undocumented migrants trying to reach the Florida coast by boat. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has said the administration will continue to support the mission, while urging "rich countries" and neighbours to do more.<sup>106</sup> He added that the "mission as currently constructed will not be enough" and must take a "new direction" to root out gangs.<sup>107</sup> Rubio has also greenlighted a payment of \$40.7 million, and contracts for mission staffers have been extended through September.<sup>108</sup> At the same time, the U.S. donations allocated to support the mission through a UN trust fund have been subject to the overall 90-day aid freeze imposed by the administration.<sup>109</sup> If the U.S. decides to stop underwriting it and no other donor steps up, the mission will lack the money to reach its planned full capacity any time soon.

Anxiety over the mission's financial viability led the Biden administration to start pushing to transform the Kenya-led multinational units into a UN peacekeeping force.<sup>110</sup> In October 2024, transitional president Voltaire officially requested that the Security Council approve a transition to a peacekeeping mission, "which would result

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<sup>105</sup> See Renata Segura and Daniel Forti, "Weighing the Case for a New Peacekeeping Mission to Haiti", Crisis Group Commentary, 1 November 2024.

<sup>106</sup> "Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Dominican President Luis Abinader At a Joint Press Availability", U.S. Department of State, 6 February 2025.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Tweet by the U.S. Embassy in Haiti, @USEmbassyHaiti, 7:09pm, 5 February 2025.

<sup>109</sup> US has frozen some funding for the UN-backed mission to quell gangs in Haiti, UN says", Associated Press, 4 February 2024.

<sup>110</sup> Media outlets reported the U.S. government's desire to transform the MSS into a UN peacekeeping force around the same time that Biden's secretary of state, Antony Blinken, visited Port-au-Prince. "Exclusive: U.S. seeks to turn Kenya mission in Haiti into U.N. peacekeeping operation", *Miami Herald*, 4 September 2024.

in more funding and a broader mandate”, as quickly as possible.<sup>111</sup> The proposal has since gained support from Kenya, the Organization of American States, CARICOM and more than a dozen Latin American countries.

Though countries in the region support the return of blue helmets to Haiti, the proposal does not have unanimous backing in New York. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has been reluctant to transform the mission into a UN peacekeeping operation, having argued for years that Haiti’s crisis requires a more robust use of force than is traditionally asked of UN peacekeepers. He also routinely chastises countries for funding the existing security mission inadequately.<sup>112</sup> On the Security Council, Russia and China are the loudest opponents of the push for UN peacekeepers: they echo the Secretary-General’s reservations, also noting that discussions about re-hatting the mission will undermine efforts to plug its financial gap. They also point to disputes within the transitional government that cast doubt upon its legitimacy and stability more generally.<sup>113</sup>

These debates continued throughout the second half of 2024 as Washington pursued other avenues to build diplomatic backing for a new peacekeeping operation. In late November, following weeks of negotiations between Beijing and Washington, the Security Council agreed to send a letter to the Secretary-General asking for an assessment of the situation in Haiti and “a full range of options” for UN support.<sup>114</sup> Officials in the Trump administration have not stated whether they support changing the mission into a UN peacekeeping operation, as the previous administration intended.

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<sup>111</sup> “Annex to the letter dated 22 October 2024 from the Permanent Representative of Haiti to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council”, UNSC S/2024/765, 25 October 2024.

<sup>112</sup> “Letter dated 14 August 2023 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council”, UNSC S/2023/596, 15 August 2023; “Press Conference by Secretary-General António Guterres at the United Nations”, 18 September 2024.

<sup>113</sup> Russia’s deputy permanent representative stated during a UN Security Council meeting that “it would be also inappropriate to speak of a full-fledged request from the host Government, since ... the legitimacy of the transitional authorities is at the very least highly questionable, as they are consumed with internal conflicts”. UN Security Council, 79th year: 9792nd meeting, S/PV.9792, 20 November 2024.

<sup>114</sup> “Letter dated 29 November 2024 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General”, UNSC S/2024/868, 2 December 2024.

## V. Making Haiti Safe and Stable

### A. Establishing Political Stability

Although far from perfect, the transitional administration has attempted to create a national unity government and managed to include most of the important political forces in Haiti, an achievement that remained elusive during almost three years of negotiations between former Prime Minister Henry and the opposition. Only a harrowing security crisis and a concerted international effort managed to break that deadlock and bring about the current set-up. Despite growing disappointment with the results, Haitians and their international counterparts should resist calls for a complete overhaul of the transitional government, such as the ones some of “the sectors” are proposing, and should focus their efforts instead on addressing the key issues impeding its effectiveness.

A first step is avoiding (where possible) political disputes about the distribution of power, which threaten the government’s basic legitimacy. The main source of instability today is the chasm between the groups that appointed the members of the Transitional Presidential Council and the councillors themselves. To resolve these differences, the government should create the Assembly of Sectors outlined in the 3 April agreement, which is a mechanism for permanent dialogue between Haiti’s many political groups and their representatives on the council.<sup>115</sup> This assembly could foster a minimum level of consensus and open a space for addressing grievances. International mediators, including CARICOM’s eminent persons’ group, as well as local facilitators working behind the scenes, should also step up and combine their efforts to repair the strained ties between various politicians and the sectors that appointed them.<sup>116</sup> More concerted pressure from Haiti’s international partners to re-establish greater backing for the transitional government’s program would also help make these efforts more fruitful.

Building public confidence in the council will also depend on it taking decisive steps to gain credibility, above all by showing it is determined to improve security and to address the corruption allegations against its members. The authorities should brook no further delay, and make it a priority to appoint members of a National Security Council, as well as backing the secretary of state for public security in pursuing a strategy for reducing violence anchored in concrete, achievable steps. Meanwhile, the refusal of the three councillors accused in the National Credit Bank scandal to cooperate with the justice system is seriously tarnishing the entire council’s public standing. Should the three councillors continue to hamper the investigation, steps should be taken to replace them.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>115</sup> For detail on the Assembly of Sectors, see footnote 28.

<sup>116</sup> The eminent persons group is a three-member delegation of former prime ministers from the region that CARICOM appointed in May 2023 to facilitate dialogue among Haitian political groups.

<sup>117</sup> On 2 December 2024, the judge investigating the corruption case involving the three members of the Transitional Presidential Council summoned them, along with the former head of the National Credit Bank, who accused them of demanding substantial bribes to retain his position. The council members refused to attend the hearing, arguing that the judge has no authority to summon them as they have the status of presidents. “Dossier BNC : Les conseillers présidentiels refusent le juge Benjamin Felismé”, *Vant Bèf Info*, 9 December 2024.

While the relationship between the council and Prime Minister Fils-Aimé has been far less acrimonious than the one with his predecessor Conille, there is no guarantee that disagreements will not emerge between the two parts of the executive branch in the future. Reaching a clearer definition of the responsibilities of the presidential council and prime minister and establishing an agreed process for resolving disputes between them, something that the Assembly of Sectors is envisaged as doing, would help quell the sort of political tumult that arose in 2024.

That said, no effort to strengthen the institutional workings of the transitional government is likely to succeed in creating stability as long as Haiti continues to be prey to politicians' personal interests. At a time when the country teeters at the edge of violent collapse, citizens are dismayed by the relentless squabbling over control of public posts and budgets that appears to absorb much of the time and energy of those in or close to power. Political leadership that responds to the gravity of the crisis will be essential to restoring faith in Haiti's authorities.

## B. *Rethinking Priorities*

Conducting elections under current security conditions is infeasible and unwise. The current timeline assumes a referendum on constitutional reform in the first half of 2025 and a general election in the second half, so that a new government can take office before February 2026, when the Transitional Presidential Council's mandate expires. This goal is unachievable unless there is immediate and radical action to improve Haiti's security, which is only likely to happen if donors step up support to the multinational mission or the UN Security Council approves a blue-helmet operation that deploys soon. Foreign powers should not press Haiti's transitional government to conduct elections unless a minimum of security for candidates, voters and the process can be guaranteed. Rather than setting a strict deadline for the polls, the transitional administration should establish clear benchmarks that need to be reached before elections are held.

The political and social forces that forged the transitional government could decide jointly to extend its mandate until security conditions allow for elections to be conducted safely. If, as recommended above, the government creates the Assembly of Sectors established in the 3 April agreement, that body would be an appropriate space to determine how to prolong the mandate of both executive bodies (the transitional presidential council and the prime minister's office). To avoid an arrangement that would result in the unelected government remaining in power indefinitely, the assembly could design a plan for a mandate renewal every few months, pending a review of progress on security benchmarks. On the understanding that elections will have to proceed even in the midst of some degree of violence, Fils-Aimé and his counterparts at the council, in close consultation with the UN and other foreign partners, could outline the minimum security threshold that would have to be passed to move ahead with the polls.

Similar practical considerations apply to the idea of calling a referendum to approve a constitution. Successful constitutional reforms, including in South Africa, Uganda, Timor Leste and Colombia, particularly those which are not carried out according to

the prescribed rules for making amendments, have been based on broad popular consultation or election of constitutional assemblies.<sup>118</sup> Some in Haiti and abroad who are supportive of constitution-making through public participation worry that leaving reform to the next elected congress, as the current rules stipulate, would risk allowing corruption and influence trafficking to influence the decisions that are taken. While those concerns are valid, it is inadvisable to rush into far-reaching constitutional changes before conditions allow for a process that is participatory, inclusive and transparent.

In a preliminary evaluation of Haiti, the Venice Commission, an advisory body to the Council of Europe on constitutional matters, noted that the absence of a permanent electoral council and electoral law, as well as the need for an independent court to deal with election disputes, are all issues that should be attended to in a new constitution (the Venice commissioners also acknowledge that the conditions for polls do not exist at the moment).<sup>119</sup> The authorities could in theory opt to use emergency executive orders signed by the Transitional Presidential Council and the prime minister to address those shortcomings noted by the Venice Commission until Haiti can undertake a thorough reform. They could, for example, name a panel of respected jurists to address any dispute that arises around the elections.

Once conditions are in place for safe elections, the government should reach out to international organisations with ample experience, including the Venice Commission, IDEA International and Interpeace, to help design a constitution-making process that gives Haitians a charter that defends the democratic gains since the Duvalier dictatorship while also laying the basis for a state that responds to the needs of its citizens through more effective government.

There are multiple paths along which Haiti could arrive at a new constitution. It could convene a diverse, inclusive national assembly, such as those held in several Andean countries in the 1990s, after an elected government is sworn in. It could also task the existing constitutional commission with completing a draft that could be debated in forums organised by state authorities and approved in a referendum held at the same time as general elections. Or it could entrust the legislature with reforming the constitution once general elections have been held and a functioning congress is re-established. Constitution-making processes, if well executed, can be important moments to strengthen national unity. Haiti should not squander this opportunity for the sake of expediency.

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<sup>118</sup> Gabriel Negretto (ed.), *Redrafting Constitutions in Democratic Regimes* (Cambridge, 2020); Michele Brandt, Jill Cottrell, Yash Ghai and Anthony Reagan, *Constitution-Making and Reform: Options for the Process* (New York, 2011).

<sup>119</sup> The Council of Europe is an international organisation that defends human rights, democracy and rule of law. “Haiti – On possible constitutional and legislative solutions to conduct future electoral processes”, European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), 11 December 2024, pp. 5–6.

### C. *Tackling Insecurity*

Robust international support will be vital to address the insecurity afflicting Haiti, especially now that the U.S. role may be trimming back its support for the country under President Trump. Despite the constraints it is under, the multinational mission has notched achievements, enhancing security at important sites, such as the ports and the police academy in the capital, and supporting local security forces in countering gang offensives and in making initial forays into gang strongholds. But its lack of resources and personnel has prohibited it from establishing a permanent presence in areas where it is trying to regain control or protecting civilians stranded along one of the gangs' many battlefronts. In its current shape, the foreign mission lacks the means to support the Haitian National Police in a successful campaign to rein in the gangs. Its hard-pressed officers have been unable to halt the gangs' expansion in the capital and beyond, let alone to help local security forces reclaim gang-held territory, with a few exceptions. Additional reinforcements are urgently needed to help Haitians turn the tide.

Given that the mission's limitations have been largely determined by its lack of resources, the Security Council could take the immediate step of authorising UN financial support to cover a large part of its logistics requirements. Guterres first floated this idea in 2023, though Council members did not seriously consider it.<sup>120</sup> This arrangement would be modelled along the lines of the UN backstops provided to African Union-authorized forces in Somalia. Funds could be channelled through the UN's current special political mission on the ground, BINUH.<sup>121</sup> The organisation could use the logistics package to pay for a wide range of materiel and include funding for lethal weaponry and wages for troops participating in the mission, provided that the Council explicitly approves it. This arrangement, which might work as a compromise among the Council's permanent members, would nevertheless take many months to become effective and it would not single-handedly resolve shortfalls within the mission's operation.

If the Security Council and Secretary-General determine that the security mission's needs are beyond what a logistics package can provide, they should cautiously but seriously consider authorising a new blue-helmet mission to Haiti. In this case, the UN should work closely with Haitian authorities to develop a targeted, sequenced approach: the priority of any new mission should first be to counter the threat posed by gangs and, only then, to gradually incorporate the wide range of UN-backed humanitarian, development, governance and state-building support needed to sustain security gains.

A new peacekeeping operation should thus begin with a narrow mandate that largely builds on the tasks assigned to the multinational mission. It should focus on quick, decisive shows of force targeting gang leaders, in contrast to a strategy that

<sup>120</sup> "Letter dated 14 August 2023 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council", S/2023/596, 15 August 2023, pp. 5-6.

<sup>121</sup> BINUH was established by the UN Security Council in October 2019. Its mandate includes strengthening political stability and good governance, supporting an inclusive national dialogue, assisting with elections, enhancing the Haitian National Police's capacity, promoting community violence reduction, protecting human rights, and reforming the justice and penitentiary systems. "Resolution 2476", UNSC S/RES/2476, 25 June 2019.

tries to spread the mission out to combat insurgency-style threats.<sup>122</sup> It would likely need comparable levels of uniformed personnel to MINUSTAH, the earlier UN stabilisation operation in Haiti, which at its peak was authorised at approximately 7,000 troops and 2,000 police officers.<sup>123</sup>

Crucially, the Security Council should ensure that the mission includes a dedicated military and police component with the capabilities and priority authorisation to conduct offensive operations against armed gangs. The Security Council could adopt a model like the Force Intervention Brigade within MONUSCO, the peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which led robust efforts to push back against armed groups in its early years. Such a force could be led by Kenya and other troop contributors (preferably from Latin America), who could offer the specialised military and police personnel needed for the task.<sup>124</sup>

The UN would need to invest heavily in other parts of the operation to support the security campaign. The mission should quickly be able to set up full-fledged intelligence capabilities and develop an extensive network of civilian liaisons, helping it conduct highly targeted operations in densely populated residential areas alongside Haitian counterparts.<sup>125</sup> As previously recommended by Crisis Group, any type of security mission should consider a phased strategy for asserting control, starting with areas where the terrain is accessible and many civilians have fled. Initial operations should include shows of force, such as drone or helicopter overflights or motor-

<sup>122</sup> The UN Security Council tasked the MSS “to support the efforts of the Haitian National Police to re-establish security in Haiti and build security conditions conducive to holding free and fair elections, by: (a) providing operational support to the Haitian National Police, including building its capacity through the planning and conduct of joint security support operations, as it works to counter gangs and improve security conditions in Haiti, characterized by kidnappings, sexual and gender-based violence, trafficking in persons and the smuggling of migrants and arms, homicides, extrajudicial killings, and recruitment of children by armed groups and criminal networks; and (b) providing support, to the Haitian National Police, for the provision of security for critical infrastructure sites and transit locations such as the airport, ports, schools, hospitals and key intersections”. See “Resolution 2699”, UNSC S/RES/2699, 2 October 2023, para. 1.

<sup>123</sup> MINUSTAH was established in April 2004, following the rebellion that toppled Aristide, and tasked with restoring order. Its mandate focused on stabilising the country by establishing a secure environment for Haiti’s political process, strengthening the rule of law and protecting human rights. The UN mission concluded its operations in October 2017, when it was replaced by a smaller mission, MINUJUSTH, focused on strengthening Haiti’s rule of law institutions, developing the Haitian National Police and promoting human rights. “Resolution 1529”, UNSC S/RES/1529, 29 February 2004; “Resolution 1542”, UNSC S/RES/1542, 30 April 2004; “Resolution 2350”, UNSC S/RES/2350, 13 April 2017; “Resolution 1780”, UNSC S/RES/1780, 15 October 2007.

<sup>124</sup> The Force Intervention Brigade is a stand-alone force within MONUSCO. Though it is under MONUSCO command, it was given a separate mandate from the rest of the mission to neutralise armed groups in the country. The Brigade is composed of dedicated troops from South Africa, Tanzania and Malawi. “Resolution 2098”, UNSC S/RES/2098, 28 March 2013, paras. 9-12.

<sup>125</sup> MINUSTAH’s joint mission analysis centre, an integrated team of civilian and uniformed personnel mandated to provide mission leadership with integrated analysis and assessments, garnered widespread acclaim for helping the mission use human intelligence to refine and conduct “search and arrest” operations against Haitian gang leaders in 2006-2007. For more information, see A. Walter Dorn, “Intelligence-led Peacekeeping: The United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), 2006-07”, *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 24, no. 6 (2009); “Haiti: Confronting the Gangs of Port-au-Prince”, U.S. Institute of Peace, September 2008.

acades of armoured personnel carriers, to enhance deterrence while taking care not to be provocative or risk escalation.<sup>126</sup>

Given the likely risk to civilians, the mission will need systems and resources to help prevent, monitor and report on any human rights violations committed by UN personnel and Haitian security forces. The mission should be mindful not to repeat the misdeeds of past peacekeeping operations, particularly sexual abuse, and incorporate the necessary protections outlined in the UN's zero tolerance policy.<sup>127</sup> Finally, it should have strong expertise and capacity to engage in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of gang members, especially to support children and young adults who are enmeshed in the gangs.

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<sup>126</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *Haiti's Gangs: Can a Foreign Mission Break Their Stranglehold?*, op. cit.

<sup>127</sup> "Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse", ST/SGB/2003/13, 9 October 2023.



## **VI. Conclusion**

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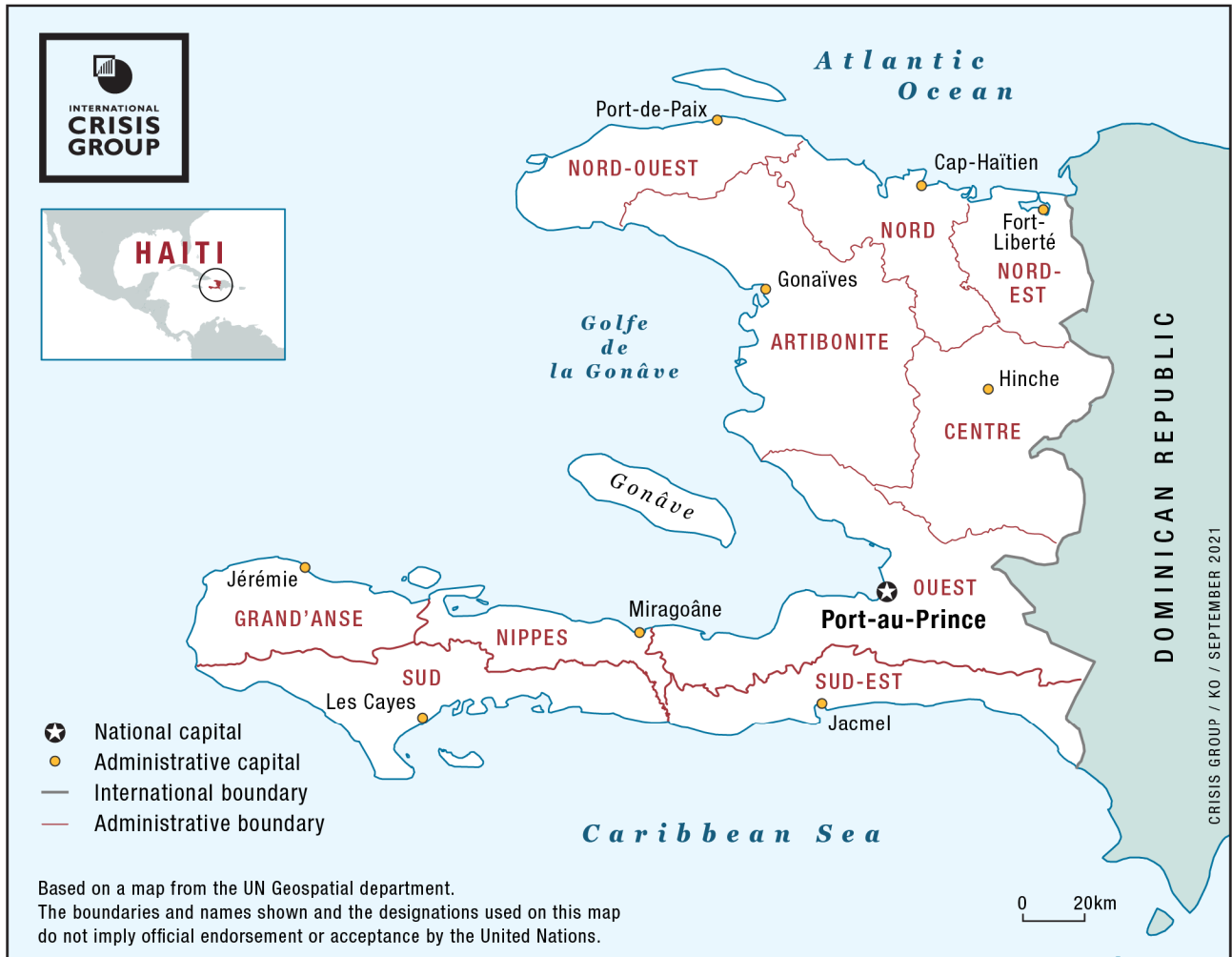
Haiti is paralysed. Early hope that an inclusive transitional government would quickly tackle the country's rampant insecurity with help from an international force has faded. The country's political class is bogged down in disputes. Donors failed to provide the contributions needed to fund the full size of the Kenya-led security mission as originally envisaged. As a result, gangs have seized the opportunity to occupy more territory, where they are lording it over the population with increasing ruthlessness. With almost one in ten people living in Haiti displaced, and almost half the population facing acute food insecurity, humanitarian conditions are desperate. In such circumstances, the transitional administration's determination to hold a vote on a new constitution and a new government by the end of 2025 seems unrealistic.

Without progress against the gangs, the transitional government cannot move forward with any of its other plans. Frustrating as any delay in elections may be, holding a partial vote under the threat of gang violence would be worse. The transitional government should scale back its electoral ambitions for 2025 but keep them in clear sight. For now, the priority must be to work with the UN Security Council to find a formula that funds in its entirety the international support needed to achieve a meaningful decrease in violence.

The challenges are daunting, but there is a foundation upon which to build. For all the infighting, the transitional government represents a broad cross-section of Haitian society. With help from foreign allies, Haitians can push the transitional administration to focus its efforts on addressing rising violence, instead of quibbling over how coveted public posts are divvied up. At the same time, the multinational mission provides a platform for the UN to scale up support, using its experience in other conflicts to move quickly. There is little time to waste.

**Port-au-Prince/Mexico City/New York/Brussels, 19 February 2025**

## Appendix A: Map of Haiti



## Appendix B: Timeline of Key Political and Security Incidents in Haiti, February 2024-February 2025

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**29 February 2024**

Viv Ansanm gang alliance launches coordinated attacks in Port-au-Prince and surrounding areas.

**2 March 2024**

Gangs attack Haiti's two largest prisons, freeing over 4,700 inmates.

**4 March 2024**

Gangs carry out a large-scale assault on Port-au-Prince international airport, forcing its closure.

**11 March 2024**

Haitians agree to create a new transitional government made up of a Transitional Presidential Council (TPC) and a prime minister.

**3 April 2024**

The "sectors" selected to form the new transitional government sign what is known as the 3 April agreement.

**24 April 2024**

Ariel Henry resigns as prime minister.

**25 April 2024**

The Transitional Presidential Council is officially installed.

**7 May 2024**

The presidential council introduces a five-month rotating presidency of the council.

**11 May 2024**

Gang launches an attack on the town of Gressier for the first time.

**17 May 2024**

The 400 Mawozo gang destroys the Croix-des-Bouquets police station.

**28 May 2024**

The TPC appoints Garry Conille as prime minister.

**25 June 2024**

The first Kenyan contingent lands in Port-au-Prince.

**16 July 2024**

A second contingent of Kenyan officers arrives in Port-au-Prince.

**24 July 2024**

The head of the National Credit Bank accuses three TPC members of demanding hefty bribes to let him remain in his position.

**21 July 2024**

Gangs launch attacks on Ganthier for the first time.

**13 August 2024**

Gangs attack the police station in the town of Cabaret.

**27 August 2024**

Haitian police and the MSS launch a weeks-long operation in gang-controlled neighbourhoods in Bel-Air and Delmas.

**13 September 2024**

24 soldiers from Jamaica and two from Belize join the MSS in Port-au-Prince.

**18 September 2024**

Seven of the nine members of the provisional electoral council are named.

**2 October 2024**

Gran Grif gang attacks Pont-Sondé in the Artibonite valley, leaving at least 70 dead. State anti-corruption body calls for a formal investigation of three TPC members for allegedly demanding bribes.

**7 October 2024**

Leslie Voltaire becomes the council's president.

**17 October 2024**

Gangs launch simultaneous attacks on several areas of the capital, focusing on Solino and Tabarre.

**18 October 2024**

An advance team of six soldiers from the Bahamas arrives in Port-au-Prince to join the Multinational Security mission (MSS).

**8 November 2024**

TPC members sign a resolution dismissing Conille and appointing Alix Didier Fils-Aimé as new prime minister.

**11 November 2024**

Gangs fire at three commercial planes attempting to land or take off from Port-au-Prince international airport. Commercial flights are suspended.

**19 November 2024**

Police and residents thwart a gang attempt to seize parts of Pétion-Ville, killing at least 28 gang members.

**6-11 December 2024**

The Wharf Jérémie gang carries out a massacre in the Port-au-Prince slum it controls, killing more than 200 people.

**7 December 2024**

The police and the MSS regain control of the town of Petite-Rivière de l'Artibonite. Over the next three days, clashes between the Gran Grif and Palmis gangs, on one side, and local self-defence groups, on the other, leave approximately 150 dead.

**16 December 2024**

Representatives of the groups that nominated the TPC meet with CARICOM and call for restructuring the presidential council.

**20 December 2024**

The TPC establishes by decree the National Security Council, whose members have yet to be appointed.

**1 January 2025**

Gang leader Jimmy "Barbecue" Chérizier announces that the Viv Ansanm gang coalition has decided to form a political party.

**3-4 January 2025**

150 military police from Guatemala and eight soldiers from El Salvador arrive in Haiti to join the MSS.

**8 January 2025**

Political groups send CARICOM several proposals for reforming the council, mentioning Viv Ansanm gang alliance as a supporter of one of them.

**15 January 2025**

The TPC appoints former police director, Mario Andrésol, as secretary of state for public security.

**18 January 2025**

Kenya deploys 217 additional officers as part of the MSS.

**27 January 2025**

Gangs launch an offensive to seize the town of Kenscoff. Local sources report that more than 100 people were killed.

**4 February 2025**

70 soldiers from El Salvador arrive in Port-au-Prince to join the MSS.

**6 February 2025**

Another contingent of 140 Kenyan officers is deployed to the MSS.

## Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

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

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

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

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

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

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

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**February 2025**

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*7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine*, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023*, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.

*Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE in a Time of War*, Special Briefing N°9, 29 November 2022.

*Seven Priorities for the G7 in 2023*, Special Briefing N°10, 15 May 2023.

*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2023-2024*, Crisis Group Special Briefing N°11, 14 September 2023 (also available in French).

*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2024-2025*, Special Briefing N°12, 10 September 2024 (also available in French).

*Overcoming the Global Rift on Venezuela*, Latin America Report N°93, 17 February 2022 (also available in Spanish).

*Keeping Oil from the Fire: Tackling Mexico's Fuel Theft Racket*, Latin America Briefing N°46, 25 March 2022 (also available in Spanish).

*Brazil's True Believers: Bolsonaro and the Risks of an Election Year*, Latin America Briefing N°47, 16 June 2022 (also available in Portuguese and Spanish).

*Hard Times in a Safe Haven: Protecting Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia*, Latin America Report N°94, 9 August 2022 (also available in Spanish).

*Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia*, Latin America Report N°95, 27 September 2022 (also available in Spanish).

*A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever*, Latin America Report N°96, 5 October 2022 (also available in Spanish).

*Ties without Strings? Rebuilding Relations between Colombia and Venezuela*, Latin America Report N°97, 1 December 2022 (also available in Spanish).

*Haiti's Last Resort: Gangs and the Prospect of Foreign Intervention*, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°48, 14 December 2022 (also available in Spanish and French).

*Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace"*, Latin America Report N°98, 24 February 2023 (also available in Spanish).

*Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime*, Latin America Report N°99, 23 June 2023 (also available in Spanish).

*New Dawn or Old Habits? Resolving Honduras' Security Dilemmas*, Latin America Report N°100, 10 July 2023 (also available in Spanish).

*Navigating Venezuela's Political Deadlock: The Road to Elections*, Latin America Report N°101, 16 August 2023 (also available in Spanish).

*Bottleneck of the Americas: Crime and Migration in the Darién Gap*, Latin America Report N°102, 3 November 2023 (also available in Spanish).

*Partners in Crime: The Rise of Women in Mexico's Illegal Groups*, Latin America Report N°103, 28 November 2023 (also available in Spanish).

*Haiti's Gangs: Can a Foreign Mission Break Their Stranglehold?*, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°49, 5 January 2024 (also available in French and Spanish).

*Fear, Lies and Lucre: How Criminal Groups Weaponise Social Media in Mexico*, Latin America Briefing N°50, 31 January 2024 (also available in Spanish).

*Unrest on Repeat: Plotting a Route to Stability in Peru*, Latin America Report N°104, 8 February 2024 (also available in Spanish).

*The Unsolved Crime in "Total Peace": Dealing with Colombia's Gaitanistas*, Latin America Report N°105, 19 March 2024 (also available in Spanish).

*The Generals' Labyrinth: Crime and the Military in Mexico*, Latin America Report N°106, 24 May 2024 (also available in Spanish).

*A Three Border Problem: Holding Back the Amazon's Criminal Frontiers*, Latin America Briefing N°51, 17 July 2024 (also available in Spanish and Portuguese).

*Rebel Razing: Loosening the Criminal Hold on the Colombian Amazon*, Latin America Briefing N°52, 18 October 2024 (also available in Spanish).

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