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Haiti, Conflict

Haiti: Dealing with Gang Violence and a Lack of Government Power to Solve Food Insecurity

“There is no life here. Haiti is sick. It’s lying in a hospital bed with no good doctors to take care of it,” explains a seventy-year-old woman. She is unable to run her street coffee business because of gang violence and inflation in Haiti’s capital Port-au-Prince. With a bag of sugar being \$38 and rice double its usual price, she is not able to eat enough.

Her food insecurity stems from the deterioration of Haiti’s government, leaving civilians with no protection or security. The lawless environment breeds gang violence, causing frequent shutdowns and evacuations that leave civilians displaced and unable to afford food. Food shortages are worsened by Haiti’s deforestation and desertification crises, which are unable to be prioritized due to the current chaos but leave soil infertile. With no upheld government action or people’s respect for their country’s laws, Haiti will have to solve immediate issues from the aid of foreign militaries and monetary donations, bringing the daily murders and starvations under tolerable control. However, the country must work to establish a trustworthy relationship between its leaders and citizens as soon as possible. Ultimately, Haitian people must self-govern through education and direct representation in elections so its people can gain concrete independence and keep foreign countries from taking advantage. Only through a country that ensures its people’s safety can people focus on their environmental and agricultural problems, solving food insecurity.

Haiti’s current issue of malnutrition due to increased violence can only be understood by looking at the layers foreshadowing its crisis: its past, origination of armed groups, and agricultural problems. The country shares the Island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic, both once colonized by Europe. In 1791, the slaves in Haiti rebelled against France’s rule, gaining independence. However, France refused to recognize Haiti as a country unless the country paid an overwhelming amount of debt. Haiti’s monetary obligation restricted the government budget, creating a cycle of loans and deeper debt. The lack of monetary freedom slowly broke down the government’s power and created holes of vulnerability. America then took advantage of Haiti’s struggle, taking control over Haiti’s national bank and in effect, Haiti’s government as a whole. Opposition to this led to political violence, and, more importantly, Haitian people’s trust and reliance on their government and policy makers disintegrated. Even after paying off the mountain of debt, the country’s geographical vulnerability to natural disasters led to much of Haiti’s money being put towards hurricane or earthquake relief, seen in the cases of Hurricane Matthew and the 2010 Haiti earthquake.

After America left Haiti, President Francois Duvalier and his son ruled the country as dictators. During their time in power, “the Duvaliers established and used a paramilitary group, the widely feared Tontons Macoutes, to stamp out opposition to their rule. The brigade killed and tortured thousands of people” (Kestler-D’Amours). The brigade became the start of gang violence in Haiti, as it introduced violence at a group level.

With decades of political instability and disaster, the consequences of people’s environmental choices were but an afterthought. This led to Haiti’s biggest threat of long-term food insecurity: deforestation. Charcoal, which is used to heat civilians’ homes, led to extreme deforestation, endangering wildlife and causing desertification. With an exponential increase in infertile soil and soil erosion, only one-fifth of Haiti’s land is suitable for agriculture today. The rest is unable to be effectively farmed, therefore failing to produce some of Haiti’s most important crops such as coffee, rice, and bananas.

The change in people's relationship with their government after America's intrusion, the beginnings of gang violence, and the staggering loss of flourishing land available set the groundwork for Haiti's current anarchic state and extreme food insecurity. Tensions increased as Haitian gangs began to get adequate resources outside of the political system. Before, gangs were financially dependent on the elite class, but recently developed independent methods of income such as smuggling and trafficking (Kestler-D'Amours). Gangs no longer needed Haiti's government, and civilians distrusted the government. Haiti's government had no more power.

The trigger was then pulled by President Moise's assassination in 2021. A hole in presidency created a political void where gangs could begin to seize control of the nation. In addition, citizens' absence of loyalty to their government and a weak justice system kept gang takeover from being stopped. The complete destruction of Haiti's government allowed gangs to commit crimes without consequence; essential aid, businesses, and community measures once secured by the government were buried and ignored. Inflation soon reached dangerous heights.

Recently, prime minister Ariel Henry has agreed to resign due to pressure from gangs, further increasing political instability and gang control. Uncontrolled shootings and looting have led to mass evacuations, disorganizing and separating families and communities. Extreme displacement and inflation have turned food insecurity into a plague, and considering how little fertile land there is available, supplies of food are unable to increase. Schools are losing cooks due to their displacement; teachers now need to cook on top of teach. Few can get relief because there are no government systems in place to aid desperate people. The UN's World Food Program believes Haiti "is on the edge of a devastating hunger crisis," and Jean-Martin Bauer, Haiti Country Director of the World Food Program, reports, "1.4 million people [are] on the doorstep on famine."

The world agrees that millions of lives depend on stabilizing Haiti; keeping gangs under control and creating a working government is inevitably tied to the country's economy, safety, and industries including food. Control of gangs and government is extremely multilayered and complex, requiring solutions that are just as intricate; answers must bring together resources internationally, nationally, and locally for plans to work.

Countries from all around the world are offering aid, but knowing how to utilize donations and resources is just as important. For instance, Kenya and Benin have volunteered to send police forces, and America is giving monetary aid (Shell). However, many Haitians, including hundreds of gangs such as G9 and GPep, oppose foreign intervention. For the gangs, foreign intervention is a threat to their control over Haiti. For citizens, their opposition is due to the past horrors of America and France's control as well as past failed attempts at foreign police aid. The most infamous example is the 2004 case of MINUSTAH, a United Nations mission established to give support to Haiti's police force. The group, consisting of people from all around the world, was so disorganized due to their conflicting ways of operation, and many officers were disrespectful of human rights (Sael and Savard). Therefore, foreign military aid must prove to be effective quickly for Haitians to start trusting and supporting intervention. Unfortunately, quick success is increasingly difficult. Haitian humanitarian Yvens Rumbold spoke at an Al Jazeera interview explaining past attempts at ensuring security failed although there were fewer gangs and more soldiers than the current situation.

Haiti's dire state requires foreign intervention to get the country on its way towards recovery and independence. Furthermore, for people to accept foreign aid, newly elected Prime Minister Gary Conille and the Transitional Presidential Council must gain the trust of citizens. But without faith in government, trust can only be established through proof of progress.

This progress can be achieved through small wins using foreign aid, building an internal defense system, and running elections supported by Haitians. First, analyzing the geographical distributions of gangs, the temporary leaders of Haiti must accept and deploy foreign police forces in outskirts of gang areas to gain small, but nevertheless immediate wins.

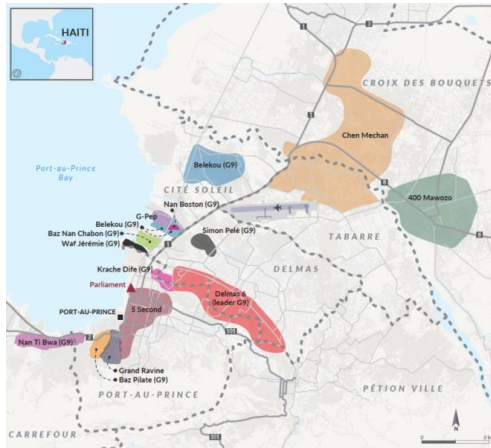


Figure 1. Port-au-Prince gang territories in October 2022 (Walker)

Data on gang distribution has been done before such as Figure 1, but more recent and accurate data should be collected. Afterwards, word of these small improvements must be spread by the government's use of media, such as Haiti's most used radio stations and employment of journalists. Only then will the people begin to trust and listen to elected officials. Through people's trust, Haiti should establish Haitian police troops and a defense system by recruiting volunteers. A justice system, preferably by Haitians, must also be set in place. Fighting violence on Haitian ground can be best done by its own people, avoiding mistakes such as MINUSTAH. At the same time, general elections must be planned out and Haitians must vote on their leaders. Support and hope for their government will encourage citizens to vote and participate.

A strong self-governing system can maintain control over violence and internal conflict only if Haiti's leaders and people continue to learn and find solutions. When major emergencies like gang violence and mass starvations are moderately resolved, Haiti must push for better access to education to create several generations of good, knowledgeable leaders. Around half of the population is illiterate and many children are not able to attend school due to school fees, with the average student attending less than 5 years of school (LiveBeyond). Poverty affects over 60% of the population, which often correlates to a lack of education. Therefore, education must not only be encouraged but made accessible, perhaps through a cheap or free education system. To be financially available and endorse a cheaper education system, Haiti can look towards canceling its national debt by getting aid from foreign powers. A better schooling system will ensure leadership to be permanently in the hands of Haitians, not exploited and taken by others.

Pairing education with think-tanks and places for open discussion where students and citizens can share ideas will create long-term stability for Haiti. Setting up areas locally throughout Haiti can ensure people from all over the nation can input their voice, no matter what age or background. Resources like Yvens Rumbold's *Policité*, a "partisan *think-and-do tank* based in Haiti aiming to drive the design and implementation of effective public development policies centered on citizens," can bring action to individuals' ideas and plans on creating a sustainable country.

Relating the improved country to its food industry, a government controlled and maintained by Haitians can then put much needed focus on Haiti's deforestation and desertification issues to restore Haiti's forests and agriculture, therefore solving its food insecurity problem. Currently, "a number of large-scale reforestation projects have been planned, but they have been postponed because of social and political unrest and the urgent need to fund other infrastructure projects" (Britannica). Therefore, deforestation can be combatted using the planned reforestation projects, which will not only help farmers by reducing flooding and fertilizing soil, but also create jobs for those working to restore the forests.

Even before Haiti reaches a point of security and widespread safety, Haitians that have been able to escape to safe areas should look to educate themselves and spread word about their situation to others. Short-term educational resources can be donated by foreign countries as aid. Even if a small handful of Haitians can speak out, educate, and lead others, Haiti will have a head start on its journey towards self-government. Learning about the country's history and Haiti's relationship to the rest of the world can facilitate ways to better solve gang conflict, poverty, and malnutrition.

The state of near anarchy in Haiti has left thousands homeless and starving. The former French colony is facing gang violence daily, with its people unable to feed themselves due to inflation and a lack of resources. To improve its destitute and horrific condition, Haiti should cautiously but gratefully accept aid and intervention from other countries. Strategically placing troops, small progress must be made, recorded, and communicated to citizens to convey the government's intention of working for the people. Once a bond is created, Haiti can carry out general elections, so individuals that prioritize the people's needs are directly voted. Once Haiti is lifted from rock bottom, the country must quickly distance itself from foreign control. Avoiding excessive dependency on foreign powers will allow Haiti to maintain an independent government that best represents its people and does not repeat its history. Emphasizing education and innovation spaces will encourage future generations to care about and improve their country. Within this process, Haiti can then solve its severe food insecurity issue by restoring its forests and making its soil more suitable to agriculture, creating jobs and industries along the way.

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