

INDICATOR INSIGHT BRIEF: HAITI GANG VIOLENCE

13/03/2024

Indicator

On 07 March, intruders attacked Port-au-Prince's Caribbean Port Services (CPS) terminal and entered the terminal's gated warehouse area that housed containers. On 04 March, around 4,000 inmates escaped following gang-led attacks on two major prisons at Port-Au-Prince, Haiti. Around 10 individuals died in the accompanying unrest across Haiti. Over 15,000 people were forced to flee their homes as a result of the ongoing gang violence. Following the escalation of incidents, the government declared a state of emergency in the country's West Region and the capital Port-au-Prince region until 03 April.

Gang leader Jimmy Cherizier threatened the government with 'civil war' and 'genocide' unless Prime Minister Ariel Henry resigned. On 12 March, PM Henry resigned, giving way to a transitional presidential council.

Context

In 2020, Cherizier created an alliance, G9 Family and Allies, that brought together nine capital area gangs. In 2021, then-President Jovenel Moise was assassinated, and Cherizier organised protests, accusing opposition leaders and police of his murder. The country's de facto leader, PM Henry has since then faced a crisis of legitimacy fuelled by frequent incidents of gang-related violence. In 2023, around 8,400 people were victims of gang violence, which was a 122% increase compared to 2022. The turf wars between rival gangs expanded out from the capital, notably to Haiti's breadbasket Artibonite region, putting pressure on food supplies, and leading to crisis levels of hunger.

Gang coalitions G9 and Gpép control over 80% of the capital. Sustained violence from 08-10 March 2024, resulted in Toussaint Louverture International Airport, Haiti, being closed to all flights, prevented the Haitian PM from returning and being forced to land in Puerto Rico. Over 40 police stations were attacked, and several government headquarters came under gang control. Diplomats from European nations have been evacuated and US military personnel have been flown in to augment embassy security, and to airlift non-essential personnel.

PM Henry's resignation gives way to the establishment of a transitional presidential council and the naming of an interim prime minister. The council has been mandated to "swiftly" appoint an interim prime minister, who will not be eligible to run in Haiti's next election – the first since 2016.

Analysis

Ambrey assesses that Haitian gangs hold the advantage in the deteriorating security situation of the country. Past data suggest gang recruitment increases during periods of unrest, displacement, and hunger. Due to the uncertain timeline of force deployment as well as the strategic issues with urban warfare against plain clothes 'soldiers', gang control over key areas such as Port-Au-Prince is unlikely to be addressed in the short to medium term. Following PM Henry's resignation, the process of appointing an interim prime minister may be fraught with further gang-led violence.

Implications

Ambrey assessed that the likelihood of continuing unrest and gang violence is HIGH in Haiti, especially at Port-Au-Prince, and there is a MODERATE risk to vessels, as vessels calling Port-Au-Prince have previously been engaged by small arms fire from criminal gangs. Ambrey advises if vessels are calling Port-Au-Prince, to arrive and depart during daylight hours due to port operations ceasing outside of daylight hours, due to port workers fearing violence and leaving the port prior to sundown. Ambrey assessed there to be a HIGH risk of facing opportunistic crime and violence on-shore at Port-Au-Prince. Ambrey advises against any crew members going ashore or conducting any crew changes in Haiti.