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No One Wants Responsibility for Haiti

by Allison Fedirka - March 18, 2024

Though Washington is preoccupied with the war in Ukraine, strained trade relations with China and a potential regional conflict in the Middle East, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken made it a point to attend a meeting of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in Kingstown, Jamaica, on March 11 to discuss the crisis in Haiti, where criminal elements have all but taken over government control. It's a reminder of how geopolitically important the Caribbean is to the U.S., and how Washington struggles to answer the demands of similarly vulnerable states.

Haiti is no stranger to insecurity and political chaos, but the events of the past few weeks have brought the country to a tipping point. From Feb. 29 to March 2, armed gangs took advantage of Prime Minister Ariel Henry's absence from the country, storming various prisons and freeing some 4,600 inmates. They then took control of public buildings, looted shops and attacked police stations and the Port-au-Prince airport.

The assaults were clearly coordinated and strategically planned to take down the government and deter international forces from intervening. In that sense, they were highly successful. Henry was marooned in Puerto Rico. The emergency CARICOM meeting – which included the U.S., Canada, France, Brazil and Mexico – called for Henry's resignation, the establishment of a transitional presidential council, and the naming of an interim prime minister. The transitional council was expected to be set within two days of its announcement. And indeed six of the seven council members submitted their candidates (all of whom have held political positions in the past). However, Henry has not resigned from his post.

The crisis has been years in the making. The U.N. stabilization mission in Haiti ended in 2017, and the last round of elections was held in 2016. A series of unfulfilled promises by various heads of government led to massive anti-government protests, a few assassination attempts and the general empowerment of vigilante groups. The resulting migration of people fleeing the country and growing coordination among Haitian gangs make it difficult for regional powers to ignore the situation. The U.S. and Brazil are extremely popular destinations for Haitian refugees. U.N. estimates put roughly 161,000 Haitians in Brazil, most of whom enter Brazil's Amazonas region through neighboring countries. The U.S. is home to some 731,000 Haitians, a figure that totals 1.2 million if decedents are also included. Haitians attempting to enter the U.S. do so via Colombia, Central America and Mexico.

In 2023, Haitians ranked as the third-largest nationality migrating through the Darien Gap from Colombia to Panama. (Venezuela ranked first and Ecuador second.) Of the 520,085 gap crossings last year, Haitians accounted for 46,422. U.S. authorities encountered Haitian migrants more than 76,100 times at the U.S.-Mexico border in fiscal year 2023, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

The other threat to regional stability is the growing power and sophistication of Haiti's criminal groups. Prior to the events of this month, the latest International Rescue Committee estimates indicated that gangs controlled 80 percent of Port-au-Prince. Over the past two weeks, that number has almost certainly risen. While there are dozens of Haitian gangs, the largest and most powerful ones have traditionally had political affiliations. G9 and G-Pep, for example, are respectively affiliated with the ruling Haitian Tet Kale Party and various opposition parties. However, many of these criminal groups have joined the recently announced Living Together alliance, the coordination of which has enabled them to carry out large-scale, well-coordinated attacks against the government and critical infrastructure. Equally worrisome is the fact that the public face of the G9, Jimmy "Barbecue" Cherizier, who previously served as a police officer, has been accused of leading massacres and openly speaks of the need to overthrow the current government as part of a first step toward ensuring that the country has a strong state, strong security system and strong justice system to fight corruption.

Several Latin American states – especially the ones with lackluster economies and strong criminal groups – fear they could share Haiti's fate. **Mexico is already in a fight of its own.** Even traditionally less vulnerable places like Costa Rica have flagged concerns over the rising presence of organized crime and begun to take measures to confront it.

To be clear, most countries in the region are a far cry from Haiti, but the improved operational reach of some of these groups makes the fear all the more acute. Venezuela's Tren de Aragua carried out targeted hits in Chile, and those responsible for the July 2021 assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moise were primarily foreigners, many of whom had affiliations with regional criminal groups. The concerns over a Haiti repeat in other countries are more than valid given the reach of organized crime groups and prison conditions in the region. Mexican cartels – namely the Sinaloa and the Jalisco New Generation cartels – dominate most of the cocaine trade in Latin America. Reports show Brazil's Primeiro Comando da Capital expanded its reach all the way to Chile, and Venezuela's Tren de Aragua now has influence across the Andean nations of Colombia, Peru and Chile. In some cases, organized crime groups will clash with one another. In other cases, the groups will cooperate, particularly in foreign territories. Meanwhile, overcrowded prisons, which are known for being

hotbeds for recruitment and administration, are a regionwide problem. Most countries are well over their prison capacity (Brazil tips the scales at 174 percent capacity and Ecuador at 112 percent), and the few that operate under 100 percent are only barely under the threshold.

The transnational nature of organized crime makes it difficult for any single Latin American government to launch successful counteroperations. Criminal groups tend to concentrate their bases in parts of the country known for having power vacuums, making it easier to supplant the state and become the dominating power. And governments and their respective security forces are forced to act within their borders unless they receive special permission to act beyond them. This limits the extent to which they can independently pursue the groups, many of which have resources and presence in other locations. While regional security cooperation is possible in theory, the competing interests and concerns of different governments make it hard in practice. In the event a country calls on outside assistance to defeat these groups, the host government is at risk that the outside country will undermine its power.

At this point, the main challenge in dealing with Haiti is finding a party willing to assume responsibility for it. While many share fears of contagion, feel the pain of migratory pressure and want to see democratic governance restored, none want to expend the resources or take the blame for what happens next. (The closest anyone has come is Salvadorian President Nayib Bukele, who said he could share lessons learned from his successful crackdown on crime.) For its part, the U.S. has offered little more than rhetoric and \$300 million in support under the auspices of U.N. security missions. It is reluctant to provide too much security force or assistance directly, especially given that the U.S. occupied Haiti for nearly 20 years. The U.S. has a history of intervening in Latin America, but right now it can't afford to antagonize the region – hence why it was happy to allow Kenya, of all places, to pledge forces to the conflict. But given the chaos in the country, even Kenya's mission has been temporarily delayed.

Washington thus has its hands full with Haiti but will offer little support. Partly that's because, for now, it's an isolated affair. But that may change if instability spreads to other parts of the region. Insecurity in the Western Hemisphere is not something Washington takes lightly.

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