



Deera Editorial

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Foreign Affairs & Policy Analysis

23 April 2026

### On Port-Au-Prince

In the first months of 2026, Port-au-Prince became something for which the vocabulary of modern statecraft is poorly prepared: a capital without a state. An estimated ninety percent of the city lies under the effective control of armed coalitions, chief among them *Viv Ansanm*, a federation of once-rival gangs whose leadership now speaks in the idiom of political parties (International Crisis Group 1–2). The Transitional Presidential Council, installed in April 2024 to shepherd Haiti toward elections, dissolved on 7 February 2026 without having delivered a single ballot (Security Council Report, “April 2026”). The country’s sole remaining executive authority now resides in a prime minister, Alix Didier Fils-Aimé, whose writ does not extend past the ring roads of the city he nominally governs. Elections are scheduled for August 2026, but the body tasked with organizing them has already conceded that security is a prerequisite the state cannot yet supply (Desrosiers, qtd. in *France 24*).

This article argues that the prevailing framing of the Haitian crisis—as a security problem awaiting a military solution—is diagnostically incomplete and strategically self-defeating. The emergency in Port-au-Prince is not, at its root, a gang problem. It is a state-formation problem, expressed through violence, financed through corruption, and sustained through the active collusion of actors who appear, in the diplomatic cables, as interlocutors rather than as subjects of investigation. To understand why the present equilibrium is so stubborn, it is useful first to recall how it was constructed.

#### **I. A BRIEF HISTORY**

Haiti is the product of a revolution without historical parallel. On 1 January 1804, after more than a decade of armed insurrection against French colonial rule, Jean-Jacques Dessalines proclaimed the independence of the former colony of Saint-Domingue, restoring the indigenous

Taíno name *Ayiti*. The new state was the first in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery, the first Black-led republic in the modern world, and the only nation in recorded history to have been established by a successful slave rebellion. The victory came at enormous human and economic cost: an estimated 200,000 Haitians died during the revolutionary decade, and the plantation economy that had made Saint-Domingue the wealthiest colony in the French empire lay in ruins.

The cost compounded. In 1825, King Charles X of France agreed to recognize Haitian sovereignty on the condition that the new republic pay an indemnity of 150 million francs—a sum equivalent, by contemporary estimates, to approximately forty billion U.S. dollars. To service the debt, Haiti borrowed from French banks at punitive interest; successor loans would not be fully repaid until 1947. The indemnity established the pattern that would shape the next century of Haitian political economy: a state whose fiscal capacity was mortgaged to external creditors before it had the chance to build internal institutions. The United States occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934, formally in the name of stability and American investment; in practice, the occupation centralized power in the capital, disarmed the peasantry, and bequeathed a reorganized Haitian Army that would serve as the instrument of every subsequent coup.

The second half of the twentieth century belonged to the Duvalier family. François “Papa Doc” Duvalier took power in a disputed election in 1957 and ruled until his death in 1971, declaring himself president for life in 1964 and relying on a paramilitary force—the *Tontons Macoutes*, or Volunteers for National Security—to terrorize opponents and collect what amounted to a parallel state revenue. His son Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier inherited the presidency at nineteen and continued the regime until a popular revolt forced him into exile in 1986. The Duvaliers left behind two durable inheritances: a political culture in which armed youth formations were routinely employed as instruments of rule, and a security apparatus that had been disbanded repeatedly but never disarmed. When President Jean-Bertrand Aristide dissolved the Haitian Army in 1995, tens of thousands of men with martial training entered an economy that could not absorb them. Many of them are the grandfathers of the gang leadership that holds Port-au-Prince today.

The twenty-first century has been a cascade of compounding shocks. The earthquake of 12 January 2010 killed an estimated 220,000 people, destroyed the capital's public infrastructure, and displaced nearly a third of the national population. A cholera outbreak introduced shortly afterward by U.N. peacekeepers killed some 10,000 more. Hurricane Matthew in 2016 compounded the damage. Under Presidents Michel Martelly and his chosen successor Jovenel Moïse, the state grew increasingly reliant on neighborhood armed groups to deliver electoral mobilization and to suppress opposition, formalizing a practice that had existed, in various forms, since the *chimères* of the Aristide period. When Moïse was assassinated in his bedroom in the early hours of 7 July 2021, the boundary between political party and paramilitary had effectively dissolved. The ensuing power vacuum did not create the gangs; it merely emancipated them from their former patrons.

## II. THE ANATOMY OF COLLAPSE

The economic geography of the capital explains why this emancipation has proven so difficult to reverse. Port-au-Prince is a port city whose arterial roads, maritime approaches, and land corridors to the Dominican border are now administered, in a literal sense, by armed groups. The U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime reports that gangs exercise effective control over all access routes to the capital, extracting revenue through the systematic taxation of commercial traffic and maritime shipments (UNODC). This is not predation at the margins of a functioning economy. It is the principal fiscal base of a parallel administration—one that, according to U.N. officials, has begun to establish parallel governance structures where the state no longer delivers services (Waly, qtd. in NPR). In 2025, the price of cooking fuel and rice, Haiti's staple food, rose steeply as a direct consequence of gang control over logistics corridors. According to Human Rights Watch, more than sixty-six percent of Haiti's population now lives on less than 3.65 U.S. dollars per day, and 5.7 million people face acute food insecurity (Human Rights Watch).

The violence these conditions enable is not incidental. According to the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, at least 5,519 people were killed and 2,608 injured in Haiti between 1 March 2025 and 15 January 2026, with more than 1.45 million internally

displaced—a figure approaching the scale of the 2010 earthquake (OHCHR). What distinguishes the present phase is the participation of the state itself in the casualty figures. Of the deaths the OHCHR verified, at least 3,497—the majority—resulted from operations led by security forces rather than from gang-initiated attacks (OHCHR). Investigators further documented 247 instances of attempted or completed summary executions attributed to police units, and concluded that drone strikes carried out by a private military contractor hired by the Haitian government “could be described as targeted killings” (OHCHR). No judicial investigation into the legality of these operations has been opened.

### **III. WHY THE PREVAILING STRATEGY WILL NOT SUFFICE**

The international response to the Haitian crisis has proceeded through three successive phases, each more ambitious than the last and each, thus far, less effective than advertised. The Kenya-led Multinational Security Support mission, authorized in October 2023, reached barely forty percent of its projected personnel ceiling and withdrew its final contingents in early 2026 (NPR). It is being succeeded by the Gang Suppression Force, authorized under U.N. Security Council Resolution 2793 of 30 September 2025, with a mandate of twelve months and a projected strength of up to 5,550 personnel (Human Rights Watch). An initial Chadian contingent arrived in April 2026 under South African leadership (Haitian Times). Early assessments by the U.N. Panel of Experts suggest that intensified operations—combined with drone strikes conducted by private contractors and the emergence of self-defense groups—have halted the territorial expansion of the gangs in certain districts, notably the Carrefour Aéroport intersection retaken in early 2026 (*Washington Post*). These are real tactical gains, and they deserve to be recognized as such.

They are not, however, a strategy. Three structural problems constrain what any security-led approach can accomplish. The first is the arms pipeline: weapons continue to flow into Haiti along the same corridors that drugs and humanitarian aid traverse, many of them originating in the United States and entering through port facilities whose customs officials have been credibly linked, in the reporting of Haiti’s Central Financial Intelligence Unit, to the very

networks they are meant to interdict (UNODC). A military force that kills gang members faster than its sister agencies interdict the supply of new recruits and weapons will, at best, hold a line. It will not advance one. The second problem is political: the U.N. Panel of Experts reported in 2025 that competing political ambitions and allegations of corruption within Haiti's transitional governing bodies have actively obstructed security operations, and that elements of the political class have continued to finance armed groups as a hedge against electoral outcomes (Panel of Experts, qtd. in NPR). The third problem is the most difficult to resolve: the gangs have begun to behave as political entities. The International Crisis Group warns that *Viv Ansanm* is deliberately repositioning itself “not just as criminal actors—but as political stakeholders,” seeking amnesty and the placement of allies in any successor administration (International Crisis Group). Any election held under present conditions risks legitimizing precisely the networks it was meant to displace.

#### **IV. TOWARD A WORKABLE PATH**

A durable settlement for Port-au-Prince requires the international community to abandon the pretense that this is principally a peacekeeping operation and to organize its instruments around a different theory of the case. What follows outlines five interlocking measures that, taken together, offer a more plausible route to a governed city. They are presented in order of sequence, not of priority; all five must advance in parallel.

**First, the arms pipeline must be treated as the center of gravity.** The most cost-effective intervention available to the United States—and the one it has been most reluctant to pursue—is the enforcement of its own export-control laws against the straw-purchase networks that route firearms through Florida and Texas to Haitian ports. A standing joint task force combining the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Homeland Security Investigations, and Haitian customs authorities vetted by an independent international body would impose real costs on the supply chain. Interdiction at the source is an order of magnitude cheaper than interdiction in a Port-au-Prince alley, and it does not require the deployment of a single additional soldier to Haitian soil.

**Second, the domestic financial architecture of the gangs must be dismantled through targeted sanctions and asset seizure.** The Haitian Central Financial Intelligence Unit has already identified the principal laundering channels: bulk cash smuggling, unregulated money-transfer services, and front companies engaged in real-estate and construction-materials transactions (UNODC). These are addressable targets. The U.N. sanctions regime authorized under Resolution 2653 should be expanded and aggressively applied not only to gang leaders but to the political and economic principals whose names appear, repeatedly, in the reporting of the Panel of Experts. Sanctions without enforcement are a rhetorical exercise; sanctions backed by correspondent-banking pressure on the Dominican and Panamanian financial institutions through which illicit proceeds transit would reshape the incentive structure of Haiti's oligarchy within a single fiscal quarter.

**Third, the Haitian National Police must be rebuilt on a vetted foundation rather than reinforced on a compromised one.** A force credibly accused by the U.N. Human Rights Office of 247 instances of summary execution in a single reporting period cannot be the principal instrument of its own reform (OHCHR). International partners should condition further assistance on the establishment of an independent inspector-general's office with subpoena authority, the recertification of existing officers through a human-rights-vetted process, and the recruitment and training of a new cadre drawn deliberately from outside the existing patronage networks of the capital. This is a multi-year undertaking. It is also unavoidable.

**Fourth, elections must be treated as a consequence of security rather than as a substitute for it.** The August 2026 electoral timetable, however diplomatically convenient, is likely to produce either a suppressed turnout that confers no legitimacy on the winner or a captured result in which *Viv Ansanm* and its allies translate territorial control into electoral control. Neither outcome stabilizes Haiti. The more defensible approach is a phased sequence: a vetted interim government of national unity empowered to govern for a fixed and short period; a mandatory disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration program as a condition of party registration; and elections held, precinct by precinct, only in districts where the state has

demonstrated an ability to protect polling places for ninety consecutive days. This is slower than the current timetable. It is also likelier to produce a government that survives its own inauguration.

**Fifth, and most neglected, the economic conditions that make gang recruitment rational must be addressed as a matter of security policy rather than of development policy.**

A young man in Cité Soleil weighing an offer of armed employment against an absence of alternatives is not making a moral error; he is performing a rational calculation in an economy that has failed him. A public-works program financed through the diaspora remittance economy—a sum that substantially exceeds Haiti’s annual foreign direct investment—could absorb a meaningful share of the at-risk population while rebuilding the physical infrastructure that gangs currently tax. Pairing such a program with a reconstituted vocational training system, administered through vetted non-governmental intermediaries rather than through ministries that have not functioned in years, offers a way to compete with the gangs for the same eighteen-to-twenty-five-year-old labor pool they currently monopolize.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Haiti is not a failed state in the technical sense; it is a state whose failure has been organized, financed, and periodically rescued by a coalition of domestic and international actors who have found the present equilibrium more tolerable than its alternatives. The cost of that tolerance is now being paid, in bodies and in displacement, by the population of Port-au-Prince. The arrival of the Gang Suppression Force offers a window—perhaps an eighteen-month window—in which coordinated pressure on arms flows, financial networks, police reform, electoral sequencing, and economic opportunity can produce compounding effects that none of these instruments, applied in isolation, has ever achieved. The alternative is a further iteration of the cycle this region has now witnessed four times since 1994: international deployment, partial tactical success, premature withdrawal, and renewed collapse at a higher level of violence. The citizens of Port-au-Prince have earned a better outcome than that. The question is whether their interlocutors are prepared, at last, to deliver one.

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