

USCRI UPDATE: COUNTRY CONDITIONS IN HAITI

Background

On February 29, 2024, a surge in gang violence erupted in Haiti, primarily in the capital of Port-au-Prince, that today continues to spiral the nation into a rapidly deteriorating humanitarian and protection crisis. This new wave of attacks perpetrated by armed gangs in Port-au-Prince marked an unprecedented level of violence that had been intensifying since the assassination of Haiti's former-President Jovenel Moïse in his home on July 7, 2021. Haiti has been without a president since and has not held elections since 2016.

Gangs now [control](#) about 80-90 percent of Port-au-Prince and this control continues to spread to other areas of the country once considered safe, forcing thousands from their homes. Attacks on civilians include killings, kidnappings, sexual violence, looting, and other widespread abuses. On March 3, 2024, the Haitian government [declared](#) a state of emergency and curfew following the escalation in violence that included a storming of two large prisons in Haiti by armed gangs who released over 3,000 inmates. The unrest occurred while Prime Minister Ariel Henry was in Kenya to sign an agreement permitting the deployment of Kenyan police to lead the United Nations (UN) Security Council-mandated Multinational Security Support ([MSS](#)) mission to Haiti.

Gangs in Haiti have long demanded Henry's resignation, and in an effort to block his return, on March 4 they [attempted](#) to seize control of the international airport. On March 11, Prime Minister Henry [announced](#) that he would resign upon the [establishment](#) of a transitional council. On April 25, the Transitional Presidential Council was [sworn in](#), and Henry presented his official resignation letter. Gangs continue to demand a presence in decision-making processes and inflict violence and instability across the country.

The following update outlines current conditions in Haiti and the resulting humanitarian situation as of May 2024.

Humanitarian Needs

Brutality inflicted by gangs has caused mass displacement both within Port-au-Prince and across Haiti as people seek safety and stability. A [report](#) released by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) covering the period from September 25, 2023, to February 29, 2024, highlighted an alarming increase in the number of people killed and injured due to gang violence in Haiti, with 4,451 killed and 1,668 injured. OHCHR [warned](#) that these figures have already "skyrocketed" in 2024, reporting 1,554 killed and 826 injured up to March 22.

A [reported](#) 362,551 people are internally displaced in Haiti, 93 percent of which is due to violence. This figure represents a 15 percent increase from the end of 2023. In just under three weeks (March 8 – March 27) over 53,000 people were forced to [flee](#) Port-au-Prince. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) [reported](#) that 68 percent of these individuals had already been internally displaced by violence and insecurity and half of them were already forcibly displaced more than once.

Unrelenting armed attacks and roadblocks continue to impact access to essential services for those displaced or trapped in their communities. In addition to government infrastructure, gangs conduct targeted attacks on hospitals, schools, pharmacies, water sources, and humanitarian personnel. Current levels of violence have severely restricted or cut off the delivery of humanitarian assistance altogether.

About 5.5 million people in Haiti need [humanitarian assistance](#) and the situation becomes increasingly dire each day. Food insecurity, disease, conflict-related injuries, and lack of clean water and sanitation strain the country's systems. On March 12, the World Food Programme (WFP) [warned](#) that "Haiti is on the edge of a devastating hunger crisis" as gang violence and resulting insecurity brought many humanitarian operations to a halt and donor funding waned. Nearly 5 million people in Haiti face acute levels of food insecurity and 1.6 million are on the verge of famine. As of March 26, 20 percent of families in Port-au-Prince alone were [reported](#) to be "one step away from famine."

Medical facilities in Haiti have been left with limited resources. Medications are either unavailable or extremely expensive, therefore inaccessible for most. The Alliance for International Medical Action (ALIMA) [reported](#), "It is difficult to find basic medications including antibiotics and antidiarrheals since gang violence has shuttered suppliers. The limited medication available has doubled and even tripled in price." The violence has forced hospitals and clinics to close, and targeted attacks against health care workers have resulted in fewer practicing doctors and nurses. By mid-March, just [two](#) surgical wards were operational in Port-au-Prince.

Lack of access to clean and safe water continues to worsen the outbreak of disease, including a cholera epidemic. In January 2024, the UN [reported](#) Haiti had one of the "deadliest outbreaks" of cholera in 2023. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) [found](#) that by the end of January 2024, over 79,000 suspected cholera cases were reported, including 1,172 deaths. On March 21, the World Health Organization (WHO) [warned](#) that the recent escalations of violence in Haiti could cause cholera cases to spike should the turmoil continue.

Haiti's Children

In November 2023, USCRI [detailed](#) an increasingly desperate situation for Haiti's children. Due to current levels of violence, this reality has worsened. On March 14, Save the Children [warned](#) that over one million children in Haiti were trapped in areas controlled or under the influence of armed gang groups, and that families in Port-au-Prince were "struggling to cope" as food supplies were running out. On April 24, the organization [reported](#) that nearly 600 children a day had fled their homes in Port-au-Prince since early March "due to gang violence, dodging heavy gunfire and witnessing dead bodies and rape."

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) [reported](#) an unprecedented three million children in Haiti need humanitarian assistance, and by the end of February 2024, over 172,000 children were internally displaced across the country. Forced to flee their homes, heavily exposed to violence, and living in dire conditions, children in Haiti are enduring a protection crisis that impacts their safety,

health, and education. An [estimated](#) 1.3 million children in Haiti need child protection services. Children living in gang-controlled areas also face an increased risk of recruitment and use by gangs.

Food insecurity and resulting malnutrition plague children in Haiti. Of the 1.6 million people on the verge of [famine](#) in the country, over 600,000 of them are children. On March 26, UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell [stated](#) that violence and instability in Haiti “is creating a child health and nutrition crisis that could cost the lives of countless children.” The agency outlined that at least 58,000 children in Port-au-Prince were suffering from severe wasting and that a key humanitarian corridor from the capital to southern regions was blocked, “leaving an estimated 15,000 children suffering from malnutrition at the brink of disaster.”

Children’s education has been devastated by violence and insecurity in the country. Gangs have attacked and looted schools, leaving students terrified to attend their classes. On March 25, armed groups [attacked](#) a school in Port-au-Prince, setting fire to 23 classrooms. Previously, UNICEF [secured](#) the release of 3,500 children trapped in two schools in La Saline as gunfire from gangs surrounded them. Attacks on schools are a violation of international humanitarian law and children’s rights. At the end of January 2024, 900 schools in Haiti were temporarily closed, depriving nearly 200,000 children from their right to education. As gangs continue to terrorize communities in Haiti, school classrooms and playgrounds have also become makeshift shelters for those displaced. The UN [reported](#), “Each classroom turned into a temporary home for multiple families. Playgrounds became tented shelters. Gymnasiums were transformed into open dormitories for those seeking safety.”

Sexual Violence as a Weapon

As gangs continue to terrorize communities throughout Haiti to gain influence and control, they use rape and other forms of sexual violence as a weapon to do so. This weapon is most often used against Haitian women and girls. OHCHR [reported](#), “During gang attacks, several women and girls have been subjected to rape, including collective rape, in their homes, often after having witnessed the killing of their husbands. Some of the victims of rape have been mutilated or killed after the attacks.” Such acts of sexual violence are used as a tactic by armed gangs in Haiti to instill fear, inflict pain, and punish entire communities.

The United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH) [reported](#) on gangs using sexual violence against women and girls while crossing “frontlines,” which are targeted attacks against women and girls while they move across neighborhoods under control of rival gangs for daily livelihood activities and to reach essential services. BINUH referred to such attacks as “a weapon to disrupt the social fabric...” Such instances included reports of individuals forced out of busses and vehicles at gun point, stripped of their belongings, and subjected to collective rape and other acts of sexual violence in broad daylight. Sexual violence also remains a tactic used in kidnappings by gangs in Haiti. OHCHR [reported](#), that rape of kidnapped hostages continues to be used as a tactic to coerce families into paying ransoms.

On April 10, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)/Doctors Without Borders [reported](#) that women seen at their clinics in recent months were “often survivors of violence, including rape,” and detailed that

due to social stigma within communities, many survivors of sexual violence were reluctant to share what had happened. MSF noted that “many are already pregnant or have a sexually transmitted infection at that point.”

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) [noted](#) a 50 percent increase in sexual violence in Haiti between 2022 and 2023, and that 80 percent of women and girls reported being subjected to some form of gender-based violence (GBV). In 2024, the situation has deteriorated. UNFPA highlighted that risks of sexual violence and GBV are “especially high in overcrowded displacement settings.” Currently, 1.2 million women and girls in Haiti need GBV [protection](#).

Action for Protection

As more people are forcibly displaced in Haiti and access to medical and protection services dwindles, urgent action must be taken to meet the growing humanitarian needs and to protect those both within Haiti and those seeking safety elsewhere.

At current writing, the near \$674 million 2024 humanitarian [appeal](#) for Haiti is only 15.89 percent funded, a \$567 million funding gap. To adequately address the humanitarian situation in Haiti and provide the necessary resources to facilitate the safe and urgent delivery of humanitarian aid to those in need, it is critical that governments and donors immediately allocate funds to the appeal.

It is imperative that the rights of Haitians seeking safety both within and outside of Haiti be upheld. On March 20, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) issued [guidance](#) on international refugee protection for Haitians. This included a moratorium on forced returns, calling on States not to forcibly return anyone to Haiti.

Despite such calls and a Level 4 Do Not Travel [designation](#) by the U.S. State Department, the United States continues to conduct [deportation flights](#) to Haiti and deport Haitians [interdicted](#) at sea.

A safe and dignified return to Haiti is impossible with current conditions. To uphold its legal and moral obligations to protect those seeking safety, the Biden administration should instead:

- Immediately halt deportations and maritime forced returns to Haiti.
- Extend and redesignate Haiti for Temporary Protected Status ([TPS](#)), as the existing designation is set to expire on August 4, 2024. TPS is a lifesaving humanitarian tool and will allow protection against removal and eligibility for work authorization for all eligible Haitian nationals in the United States.
- Expand and expedite parole to Haitians. The Biden administration should remove the monthly cap on [CHNV parole](#) recipients and expedite processing for the Haitian Family Reunification Parole ([HFRP](#)) program.
- Haitians must be allowed and encouraged to exercise their right to seek asylum as enshrined in [U.S. law](#).
- Refuse any plan to hold and process Haitian migrants and asylum seekers at Guantanamo Bay.