

The Situation in Haiti

History of Haiti

Haiti During Colonization & Haitian Independence



Located in the Caribbean, Haiti makes up a third of the island of Hispaniola, neighboring the Dominican Republic.¹ In 1492, Christopher Columbus arrived on the coast of Hispaniola and claimed it for Spain. Europeans gradually began settling in and many of the island's indigenous people were killed by overwork, extermination, and disease.² In 1697, Spain ceded Haiti to

France via the Treaty of Ryswick and they took complete control over it.³ Considered the “Pearl of the Antilles”, it was one of the most lucrative colonies in the world. The French imported African slaves to produce sugar, coffee, and other cash crops for the global market.⁴ The colony's population and economic output grew rapidly and it became one of France's most prosperous possessions.⁵ By the 1780's, almost two-thirds of France's foreign investments went to the colony.⁶

Slaves in the colony were forced to endure long workdays in cruel conditions, and many died from injuries and malnutrition. In 1791, inspired by the French Revolution, thousands of slaves rose in rebellion. The country was torn by rival factions and in an attempt to control the situation, the French government soon abolished slavery.⁷ In 1802, following the discovery of evidence supporting France's intention to restore slavery, slaves fought and defeated a large part of the French army. The French withdrew from Haiti yet continued to maintain a limited economic and diplomatic presence in the island. On Jan 1, 1804, the entire island was declared independent under the name of Haiti. The long fight for independence had resulted in devastated towns and plantations. There was much civil unrest and economic uncertainties due to the lack of a proper form of governance.

In 1825, France demanded 150 million francs as a price for Haiti's freedom, claiming compensation over their loss of property during the revolution as well as Haiti's diplomatic recognition as an independent state.⁸ The United Kingdom recognized the state of Haiti as independent in 1833, followed by the United States in 1862.⁹ Unable to immediately pay France, this debt—and its steadily growing interest—placed Haiti in an economic chokehold; allowing France to

¹ "HAITI: A Brief History of a Complex Nation." *The University of Kansas*. <https://haitianstudies.ku.edu/haiti-brief-history-complex-nation>.

² "Haiti faces famine – but its troubles are rooted in a brutal colonial past." *The Guardian*. <https://shorturl.at/aqFK7>.

³ "1697 - Treaty of Ryswick." *The Haitian Times*. <https://haitiantimes.com/timeline/1697/>.

⁴ "The Greatest Heist In History": How Haiti Was Forced To Pay Reparations For Freedom. *National Public Radio*. <https://shorturl.at/iAV25>.

⁵ "Haiti." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Haiti/Early-period#ref515792>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "The Haitian Revolution and the Hole in French High-School History." *The New Yorker*. <https://tinyurl.com/mruk8nvx>.

⁸ "Haiti faces famine – but its troubles are rooted in a brutal colonial past." *The Guardian*. <https://shorturl.at/aqFK7>.

⁹ Ibid.

place Haiti indirectly under their control as the large debt prevented Haiti from investing that money on its own devastated nation. Haiti was forced to take out multiple loans and this stunted the growth and redevelopment of their own economy.¹⁰

Additionally, Haiti was surrounded by states where slavery continued. As a nation of freed slaves, Haiti was a threat to a pro-slavery world order. Haitian success was perceived as a threat to these systems for decades, especially as slave-based economic systems were very lucrative. This is why it took much longer for Haiti to be recognized as an independent state by other countries. For example, President Thomas Jefferson worked to isolate Haiti and restrict them economically in fear of their success inspiring slave revolts in the United States.¹¹ They would only officially recognize Haiti when slavery was slowly beginning to be abolished.

Haiti Since 1900: Repeated Interventions

Haiti continued to struggle after achieving independence. The United States had substantial commercial interests in Haiti and was also concerned with the growing amount of German influence within Haiti.¹² Following the assassination and overthrow of several Haitian presidents from 1911 to 1915, the United States grew worried of foreign intervention. In 1914, the Wilson Administration sent marines into Haiti and took control of its national bank. Marines were sent to Haiti under the pretense that the invasion was an attempt to prevent the country's descent into anarchy when their main goal was to protect American assets.¹³ The Haitian-American Convention that was established in 1915 gave the United States complete control over Haitian finances and the right to intervene in their foreign policy, while also forcing the election of a pro-American president.¹⁴ The United States also pushed Haiti to form a constitution that would allow foreign land ownership—something that had been outlawed in Haiti as a way to prevent foreign control. Following a series of strikes and uprisings, the USA officially withdrew from Haiti in 1934 while maintaining economic ties.¹⁵

This intervention and occupation by the United States had not left Haiti more politically stable or economically self-sufficient. In fact, internal struggles continued to plague Haiti as well. For example, Haiti was forced to spend 40% of its national income on paying debts to France and the United States, stunting economic growth and worsening effects of the Great Depression.¹⁶ Many Haitian citizens were also massacred by the Dominican Republic whose President Rafael Trujillo was backed by the United States. In the Parsley Massacre in 1937, President Trujillo organized the massacre of between 9,000 and 20,000 Haitians along the Haiti-Dominican border.¹⁷

¹⁰ "How colonial-era debt helped shape Haiti's poverty and political unrest." *ABC News*. <https://tinyurl.com/3b5e3xpi>.

¹¹ "The United States and the Haitian Revolution, 1791-1804." *U.S. Department of State*. <https://tinyurl.com/493k5m2r>.

¹² "U.S. Invasion and Occupation of Haiti, 1915-34." *U.S. Department of State*. <https://tinyurl.com/mt525rzt>.

¹³ "US Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1934." *U.S. Navy*. <https://tinyurl.com/2jfaev7w>.

¹⁴ "The 1915 U.S. Invasion of Haiti: Examining a Treaty of Occupation." *Social Education*. <https://tinyurl.com/vcyr543s>.

¹⁵ "The American Withdrawal from Haiti, 1929-1934." *Duke University Press*. <https://tinyurl.com/vc8j79zc>.

¹⁶ "The Haitian Timeline: A History of Military Dictatorship and Civil Rule (Revised and Expanded)." *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*. <https://coha.org/military-dictatorship-in-haiti/>.

¹⁷ "The massacre that marked Haiti-Dominican Republic ties." *BBC News*. <https://tinyurl.com/2p9ya8y6>.

Haiti's political instability continued and culminated in Francoise "Papa Doc" Duvalier seizing power in 1956 and getting elected as president a year later.¹⁸ He quickly established a dictatorship and ruled until 1971 when his son, Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, then took over and ruled until 1986.¹⁹ Their leaderships were marked by indiscriminate and extrajudicial violence; rampant human rights abuses; widespread corruption; and continued economic malaise.²⁰ Their repression and incompetence caused thousands of Haitians to flee. Scholars estimate that between 30,000 and 60,000 Haitians were killed, raped, and tortured under the Duvaliers.²¹ The Duvaliers used the brutal Tontons Macoute militia who often stoned and burned people alive, regularly following these rituals by hanging the bodies of the victims in the streets as a warning to the population.²² The Duvaliers embezzled up to 80% of Haiti's international aid, and their debts accounted for about 45% of the debt that Haiti has had to pay back.²³

Upon the overthrow of 'Baby Doc' in 1986, 75% of the country was living on less than \$2.00 a day.²⁴ The presidents that came after were largely unable to move the country forward. When eventually the country's first free and fair democratic elections took place in 1990, Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected.²⁵ He was soon overthrown by the Haitian military and fled. The UN placed sanctions on Haiti and President Aristide eventually returned, but was deposed following multiple protests and violent clashes. After an intervention by the United States, the UN, and various other countries Aristide returned as the legitimate leader of Haiti in 1994. As throughout much of Haiti's history, Haiti in the 1900s was subject to numerous interventions into the country with few positive results. Yet, at the same time, when left to its own devices the country was controlled by a murderous family for nearly 30-years who killed large numbers of Haitians and helped instill a culture of corruption within the government—both legacies that continue to be felt today.

The Current Situation

Humanitarian Crises since the 2010 Earthquake

On January 12, 2010, more than 300,000 people were killed and nearly 1.5 million were left homeless after a magnitude 7 earthquake struck Haiti. Large parts of the country were buried under metal and twisted concrete, destroying much of the country's fragile infrastructure and leaving citizens in dire need of assistance. Although it happened over a decade ago, Haiti continues to face many crises such as worsening food insecurity and water borne disease epidemics. A vulnerability to natural disasters

¹⁸ "The Haitian Timeline: A History of Military Dictatorship and Civil Rule (Revised and Expanded)." *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*. <https://coha.org/military-dictatorship-in-haiti/>.

¹⁹ "The Duvalier Dynasty 1957-1986." *Latin American Studies*. <https://www.latinamericanstudies.org/haiti/duvalier-dynasty.htm>.

²⁰ "Haiti: The truth must not die with Jean-Claude Duvalier." *Amnesty International*. <https://tinyurl.com/23arsfxy>.

²¹ "Haiti: a long descent to hell." *The Guardian*. <https://tinyurl.com/yc4jv4dt>.

²² "The Tonton Macoutes: The Central Nervous System of Haiti's Reign of Terror." *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*. <https://tinyurl.com/3ryuxwmj>.

²³ "Haiti: a long descent to hell." *The Guardian*. <https://tinyurl.com/yc4jv4dt>.

²⁴ "Liberated Haiti: thirty years after Duvalier." *Global Americans*. <https://tinyurl.com/5n8yy8au>.

²⁵ "Jean-Bertrand Aristide Fast Facts." *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2013/07/18/world/jean-bertrand-aristide-fast-facts/index.html>.

has greatly restricted proper redevelopment. Many donors rushed to donate billions of dollars to help Haiti recover, yet the weak public administration paired with disorganization of these funds led to the aid being insufficient and even harmful at times. Many studies reported the presence of thousands of NGOs in Haiti, yet the MPCE (Ministry of Planning and External Co-operation) barely recognized 300 of them, meaning a majority of them had been operating in obscurity and had arrived in Haiti to operate based on their own interests. There was no coordination between them or governments, and despite the billions of dollars donated, many citizens were still living in refugee camps five years later and the majority of the infrastructure had not been rebuilt. Haiti has always been vulnerable to earthquakes, and the government faces a large challenge when developing and implementing emergency plans for disasters.



The 2010 earthquake also played a major role in the rise of cholera, which has sickened nearly 800,000 people. Cholera was brought to the country by UN peacekeepers sent to aid the country after the earthquake.²⁶ The earthquake provided conditions ripe for the cholera to spread. The cholera epidemic has also had continuous resurgences, with the most recent one being in October of 2022. There have been over 600 confirmed cases of cholera as of November, 2022 and over 6,500 suspected cases in the greater Port-au-Prince area.²⁷

Haiti, already weakened by the earthquake and the botched reconstruction efforts was particularly vulnerable to other natural disasters. In 2010 Haiti faced Hurricane Tomas, which brought heavy rains and gusty winds, causing flooding in many areas.²⁸ Haitians stuck in refugee camps 10-months after the 2010 earthquake were inundated with rain and ill prepared for flood and the hurricane's winds. Even 6-years later, Haiti was still as susceptible to hurricanes. Hurricane Matthew struck Haiti on October 4, 2016, which resulted in around 1,000 deaths, displaced 175,000 people, and destroyed vegetation and many homes, schools, and hospitals.²⁹ The hurricane left many waterlogged areas which lead to 8,000 new cholera cases.³⁰

In August 2021, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti, causing widespread destruction in rural areas. Around 800,000 people were impacted and thousands of homes were destroyed alongside schools and roads which disrupted key services such as transport and farming.³¹ Many health facilities were destroyed and the UN set up emergency wards. That November, the government estimated that around 2 billion dollars was needed to recover, with one third of it going to reviving social services and the rest going towards boosting agriculture and repairing key infrastructure.

²⁶ "Even Before Jovenel Moïse's Assassination, Haiti Was In Crisis." *NPR*. <https://tinyurl.com/2y6b3rtf>.

²⁷ "Cholera in Haiti." *Centers for Disease Control & Prevention*. <https://www.cdc.gov/cholera/haiti/index.html>.

²⁸ "Hurricane Drenches Western Haiti." *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=131104656>.

²⁹ "A Photographer's Journey Into Haiti's Cholera Crisis." *National Geographic*. <https://tinyurl.com/bddepbk6>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ "Rebuilding Haiti: The post-earthquake path to recovery." *UN News*. <https://tinyurl.com/bddzrb28>.

Haiti's poverty has been exacerbated by the numerous natural disasters since 2010. These disasters have weakened Haiti's economy, destroyed much of its infrastructure and undermined its governments already limited-capacity. These factors make it so that Haiti also has the highest hunger rates in the western hemisphere; a situation that is getting worse, with 4.4 million people facing food insecurity as of 2021.³² Climate change, whose impacts are exacerbated by the El Nino winds, contributed to droughts which causes crops in Haiti to fail. Roughly 50% of the country's labor force is involved in agriculture.³³ When crop failures are paired with inflation, it is much harder for citizens to afford food.

The 2021 Assassination of President Moise

With devastating earthquakes and an unstable system of government, Haiti was in crisis long before the assassination of their President Jovenal Moise on July 7, 2021. Haiti, while still struggling to recover from the devastating 2010 earthquake, has also seen gangs and criminal groups become rampant in its capital city, Port-au-Prince. The violence has injured and killed many innocent civilians as gangs battled for control over populous areas. Hundreds of homes and businesses have also been burned. The government had very little success in trying to control them as there are certain areas of Port-au-Prince that are not even accessible.³⁴ Being one of the poorest countries in the world, nearly half the population needs food assistance, even more so after Hurricane Matthew struck the country in 2016. More than 90% of Haiti's economy is extremely susceptible to natural disasters and the government still lacks proper response plans.³⁵

Originally a businessman who had grown rich as a fruit explorer, Jovenal Moise took office in 2017 after a contested election.³⁶ He had been ruling by decree for more than a year when he was killed after dissolving parliament and failing to hold legislative elections.³⁷ He also proposed a referendum on changes to Haiti's Constitution that would allow the president to run for two consecutive 5-year terms and would also abolish the Haitian senate. Haiti had been growing increasingly unstable under his rule and he faced many violent protests as critics accused him of trying to cement his power while the opposition demanded that he step down.³⁸

On July 7, 2021, President Jovenal Moise was shot dead in Port-au-Prince. Haitian police alleged a group of foreign mercenaries—26 Colombians and two Haitian Americans—were responsible for the killing. At the end of January 2023, dual Haitian American citizens James Solages and Joseph Vincent as well as Colombian citizen German Alejandro Rivera Garcia were charged by the U.S. Department of Justice in connection to the murder.³⁹ Dr. Christian Emmanuel Sanon was also charged with smuggling. The police believe they may have been duped by Dr. Sanon, who was planning to become president. The attackers had disguised themselves as American drug addicts and

³² "The Haiti crisis, explained: 5 things to know." *Concern USA*. <https://tinyurl.com/3ju3hyub>.

³³ "Haiti." *International Fund for Agriculture*. <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/operations/w/country/haiti>.

³⁴ "Even Before Jovenal Moise's Assassination, Haiti Was in Crisis." *NPR*. <https://tinyurl.com/2y6b3rtf>.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

³⁶ "14 Months After Elections Began, Haiti Finally Has a President Elect." *NPR*. <https://tinyurl.com/237jvf65>.

³⁷ "Haiti opposition condemns country's slide into rule by decree." *Reuters*. <https://tinyurl.com/39zpx46s>.

³⁸ "The Slaying of Haiti's President Has Thrust the Struggling Nation Deeper Into Turmoil." *NPR*. <https://t.ly/BX6Y>.

³⁹ "Haiti president's assassination: What we know so far." *BBC News*. <https://tinyurl.com/mvjuuc88>.

met little to no resistance on the way into Moise's estate. Their original plan was allegedly to kidnap the president and fly out of the country, but it ended in the assassination of Moise instead.⁴⁰ Sanon was later charged with attempting to smuggle ballistic vests from the United States to Haiti and faced a 20-year sentence.

Nearly two weeks after the president's assassination, a man named Ariel Henry (the man Jovenal Moise chose to be the next prime minister) was set to assume office, replacing the interim Prime Minister Claude Joseph. In the days after the assassination, there was a power struggle between Joseph and Henry about who should be leader, and ultimately the two agreed that Joseph would step down.⁴¹ Moise's killing cast Haiti into further political turmoil which emboldened gangs who have since expanded their control to large areas of the island. This increased violence has exacerbated a humanitarian crisis caused by natural disasters and high rates of poverty. Ariel Henry remains acting President of Haiti, but no elections have been scheduled, despite Henry installing a transitional council.⁴²

Calls for Foreign Intervention?

As the humanitarian and security situations have declined in Haiti, groups within and outside of Haiti have advocated for some form of a foreign intervention that range in scope from an American-led intervention to an UN-led security mission. Proponents of foreign intervention include current Acting President Ariel Henry and his cabinet who made such a call in October 2022.⁴³ In March 2023 after the death of nearly 535 Haitians, the UN called for the deployment of a specialized support force to contain the gangs and criminal elements wreaking havoc in the nations.⁴⁴ The Security Council has established a limited sanction regime through Resolution 2653 on Haiti to try and prevent the movement of weapons and funds to and from the criminal elements in the country.⁴⁵ Yet foreign interventions in Haiti, of any variety, come with a large amount of historical baggage given the history of repeated interventions into Haiti since its independence. Given the United States' role in these repeated interventions, it has tried to attract another country to lead an expedition. These efforts have failed, with Brazil declining to lead a mission in mid-2023.⁴⁶ Within Haiti there is opposition to foreign intervention from opponents of Acting President Henry who view any intervention as an effort by Acting President Henry and other elites to maintain their hold on power—particularly in light of allegations of Acting President Henry's involvement in Moise's assassination.⁴⁷ Yet some Haitians still believe that foreign intervention—or the credible threat of

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ "Man pleads guilty in US probe of Haiti president assassination." *Al-Jazeera*. <https://tinyurl.com/3n58dhty>.

⁴² "Haitian PM installs transition council to prepare for long-awaited elections." *Reuters*. <https://tinyurl.com/ye5waxhf>.

⁴³ "Haiti's request for troops resurrects troubled history of foreign interventions." *PBS*. <https://tinyurl.com/yzuj5avd>.

⁴⁴ "UN Calls for Foreign Intervention in Haiti as Violence Surges." *The Guardian*. <https://tinyurl.com/366ud94v>.

⁴⁵ "Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 2653 (2022) concerning Haiti." *U.N. Security Council*. <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/2653>.

⁴⁶ "UN Calls for Foreign Intervention in Haiti as Violence Surges." *The Guardian*. <https://tinyurl.com/366ud94v>.

⁴⁷ "Haiti's Last Resort: Gangs & the Prospect of Foreign Intervention." *International Crisis Group*. <https://tinyurl.com/36wdepi3>.



armed intervention—is needed in order to get criminal gangs to demobilize and negotiate an end to their tyranny.

The Complicated Role of UN Peacekeepers

Despite internal and external opposition to foreign intervention into Haiti, the Security Council would ultimately be able to approve a security mission to the country should it wish to do so. Yet, the United Nation’s last peacekeeping mission that began in 2004 and ended in

2019 had a number of issues that did little to improve the conditions within Haiti. The peacekeeping effort known as United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) from 2004 to 2017 and United Nations Mission for Justice Support in Haiti (MINUJUSTH) from 2017 to 2019 sought to stabilize the country. It scored some successes, such as allowing for a number of free, fair, and democratic elections. But the peacekeeping missions, comprised mainly of personnel from Brazil, Chile, the Caribbean, and Latin America, became embroiled in allegations of sexual assault and sexual abuse of Haitians, including children.⁴⁸ Peacekeepers also, in an effort to combat gangs and gang violence (the same impetus for foreign intervention now), fought a major battle in the Cite Soleil in 2007 that caused civilian deaths and did little to eject the gangs from the area.⁴⁹ Most unfortunately, after the 2010 earthquake, soldiers from the UN Mission brought cholera to Haiti due to their improper sanitation procedures. Cholera had been eradicated in Haiti since the early-1900s and the country was ill-prepared to combat it after the earthquake and given the government’s limited budget and capacity.⁵⁰ Cholera has continued to spread due to poor sanitation.

All of these factors and dynamics, when compounded with historical experiences, make another UN-led intervention a risky proposition. For many Haitians, the previous UN mission is not remembered positively. It is also not clear how effective another mission to Haiti would be at producing greater security within the country. Battles with gangs during the previous mission did not eradicate them. If a mission were approved, it would need to set clear and limited goals, such as securing specific and vital infrastructure, such as the country’s main ports; ending the growing size of lawless zones; and training and empowering local police forces to ethically combat gangs.⁵¹

Case Study: The Break Down of Governance in Haiti

In brief, Haiti finds itself in its current predicament because of a variety of factors: a lack of strong institutions due to repeated foreign interventions and foreign-supported dictators during the 1900s; a series of devastating natural disasters starting in 2010 in which much of the humanitarian aid was squandered by the government, corrupt business interests, and incompetent foreign NGOs; one of the highest poverty rate in the world; and lingering instability that culminated in the assassination of

⁴⁸ “Peacekeeping in Haiti: Successes and Failures.” *Boston University*. <https://tinyurl.com/4zs78smz>.

⁴⁹ “Chapter 3: The Gangs of Cité Soleil.” *National Defense University*. <https://tinyurl.com/bdf5wr3a>.

⁵⁰ “2010 Haiti Cholera Outbreak and CDC Response.” *Centers for Disease Control & Prevention*. <https://tinyurl.com/2p827uru>.

⁵¹ “Haiti’s Last Resort: Gangs & the Prospect of Foreign Intervention.” *International Crisis Group*. <https://tinyurl.com/36wdepi3>.

their most recently elected president. Criminal gangs and groups currently dominate much of Haiti. Because of a lack of faith in government, gangs can easily gain footholds in communities and neighborhoods, allowing them to push out legitimate Haitian authorities through violence, bribery, or due to those official's incompetence. This allows these gangs to control territory and exert control over Haitians living in those areas, exacting taxes, implementing 'justice', and taking on the role previously accorded to the government. The Haitian government, underfunded and untrusted, struggles to effectively combat these groups. But the gangs, despite removing the presence of the Haitian government, do not carry out the activities of the government. The gangs, their violence, and their criminality prevent Haitians from going about their daily lives by closing schools and hospitals, and preventing the import and export of goods by controlling the country's shipping ports.⁵² By April 2023, gangs were estimated to control 80% of Port-au-Prince, the capital.⁵³

Yet there is hesitancy globally and domestically about another foreign intervention. But these gangs and their leaders cannot continue to displace Haitians and strangle the country's future. The breakdown of governance in Haiti has directly contributed to its current predicament and only through better, more humane and effective governance can the root causes that allowed the gangs to rise and control swathes of territory in the nation be destroyed. Armed intervention by an exterior force might be crucial in giving the government breathing space to reestablishing itself; but foreign armed intervention could also contribute to the further delegitimation of the Haitian government. Any foreign intervention, UN-led or led by someone else, must be carefully weighed and calibrated against efforts to improve governance within Haiti.

Questions to Consider

- To what extent can the country's immediate humanitarian needs be addressed?
- To what degree can foreign intervention help the country's security situation?
- To what extent could foreign intervention make the humanitarian, political, and security situation worse?
- How can the country break the political paralysis caused by the assassination of President Moïse?

⁵² "Haitian children at mercy of armed gangs as schools close." *UN News*. <https://tinyurl.com/e53wuh2f>.

⁵³ "Neighborhood fights Haiti gangs after vigilante killings." *AP News*. <https://apnews.com/article/haiti-gangs-vigilante-justice-5e18ba3803394175399e5be1f04da44a>.