

On the ground in Haiti

Growing war zone facing US deportees

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PERSPECTIVE

I returned to Port-au-Prince on a muggy morning in June, 14 years after I was last in Haiti as a UN aid worker responding to the country's 2010 earthquake. In the days that followed, I saw a city hollowed out by years of deliberate and indiscriminate armed conflict. Gangs had fortified neighborhoods that I had once freely driven through in my Toyota 4Runner. Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected police vehicles were posted at intersections in the few pockets where the government still had a presence. At a Doctors Without Borders (MSF) hospital in the Cité Soleil neighborhood, the cement was still drying on a 70-foot protective wall that was built after a recent gang battle left the facility littered with stray bullets.

With gangs now controlling the large majority of Port-au-Prince — up to 90 percent by some estimates — even the senior security officials tasked with stopping them are not safe. Days before I arrived, gang members dressed in police uniforms kidnapped James Boyard, inspector general of the Haitian National Police, along with his wife and their six-year-old daughter, a US citizen. The parents' errand that morning was one most people wouldn't think twice about: taking a sick child to the doctor after a restless night. In Haiti, it's now a life-and-death gamble.

Henry Wooster, chargé d'affaires at the US embassy in Haiti, called the situation "full-scale urban warfare" when testifying before the Senate Committee on Appropriations in February. That language matches the State Department's own assessment: Haiti is under a Level Four "Do Not Travel" advisory given the risk of crime, terrorism, and kidnapping.

But in late June, the US Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Department of Homeland Security and allowed the Trump administration to terminate Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Haitians, a humanitarian program allowing migrants whose countries are considered unsafe to legally reside and work in the United States. Up to 350,000 Haitians, who have been protected under TPS since Haiti was designated for the program after the devastating 2010 earthquake, can now be deported back.

The Trump administration's actions acknowledge that the removal of these humanitarian protections is at odds with the security situation on the ground. The US government is pushing an aggressive counter-gang offensive within Haiti itself. Built around a 5,500-troop, UN-authorized Gang Suppression Force that effectively has a license to kill, the campaign has surged security personnel and resources into the country. The administration has also indicated it plans to collaborate with a lethal drone operation in Haiti run by former Blackwater CEO Erik Prince's private military company, Vectus Global.



Gang Leader Jimmy Chérizier (C) patrols the streets with gang members in the Delmas 3 area in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on February 22, 2024.
● GILLES CLARKE/GETTY IMAGES

Missing from the strategy, however, is a humanitarian surge to match. I saw the consequences of this imbalance firsthand: a humanitarian response less than half funded, even as violence drove displacement to record highs. After the earthquake response 14 years ago, I remember thinking Haiti could not get worse. But in 2026, it has.

A country in freefall

The World Food Program (WFP) helicopter carrying me into Port-au-Prince touched down on an improvised dirt helipad carved into the downslope of a ravine, in the leafy suburb of Pétiön-Ville — a lily pad of tenuous security and luxury comforts. After landing, the helicopter never cut its rotors. Passengers hustled off and on in under 10 minutes while an armed guard kept watch.

Our landing zone was just a few hundred paces from the Karibe Hotel, home to the WFP Country Office and its permanent staff. The travel method was not one of convenience, but the result of a Federal Aviation Administration ban on US flights below 10,000 feet over Haiti. The policy decision came after gangs opened fire on three commercial aircraft at Toussaint Louverture International Airport in November 2024, wounding a Spirit Airlines flight attendant.

At the start of my trip, I visited a WFP cash distribution site serving people recently displaced by gang violence in Cité Soleil, a densely packed urban slum that stretches along the western edge of Port-au-Prince. Its 34 neighborhoods have been balkanized by generations of gang control.

Under a high noon sun on the grounds of a fire department compound, I watched as hundreds of displaced people patiently rotated through a circuit of lines. Over the hum of conversation, a young woman in a neon-green staff polo used a bullhorn to corral people through registration sign-ins and benefit card checks. Eventually, enve-

lopes of emergency cash — 15,600 Haitian gourdes, or around \$120 — were pulled from boxes, counted by hand in front of each recipient, and handed over to those recently displaced from Cité Soleil.

Twenty-five-year-old Jean Wadline was one of them. The mother of a seven-year-old son and expecting her second child later this year, Wadline fled Cité Soleil after days of armed clashes erupted in mid-May. Through an interpreter, she described how two gangs began fighting in her subsection of the neighborhood. Then, for no reason, one of them set fire to her block.

She ran. It happened so fast, Wadline left with nothing — not even her identification card. Thankfully, she said, her son was in school that day.

At first, she stayed with friends. But the arrangement eventually became untenable, and she was asked to leave. Now, Wadline sleeps on the floor of a school classroom with 50 other displaced people, where hanging sheets divide the room into smaller pods for modest privacy. As she described the conditions in which she and her family were living, she began to cry.

Wadline explained how she has taken on debt to buy food. Most of the WFP cash assistance in her hand — made possible through the US State Department's humanitarian funding — would go toward paying back the money she owed. What's left would buy uncooked spaghetti and rice.

Her story is devastatingly ordinary: nearly 17,500 other Cité Soleil residents were displaced during the single gang battle that took her home in May. Many other neighborhoods in the capital have suffered the same fate.

Satellite imagery shows the scale of the destruction. The pictures below show the neighborhood of Solino in Port-au-Prince in 2021 and 2025, with buildings collapsed or missing their roofs as a result of gang violence.

Over the last four years, 1.5 million peo-

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ple have fled their homes due to gang violence, amounting to 12 percent of the population, according to the International Organization for Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix.

The forces driving that displacement accelerated after the July 2021 assassination of president Jovenel Moïse. In the wake of his death, 26 gangs tightened their grip on the country, and in early 2024, the largest of them united into a single coalition called Viv Ansanm ("Live Together" in Haitian Creole). The group is led by former police officer Jimmy "Barbecue" Chérizier. The United States is offering a \$5 million bounty for information leading to his arrest.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime found that Viv Ansanm, like other gang coalitions in the country, sustains itself through transnational criminal networks, armed largely by a surge of high-caliber, military-style weapons trafficked from the United States. Gangs deploy violence strategically — to "extract rents, expand influence, contest authority" — and recruit liberally. Roughly half of Haiti's gang members are now children, in what the United Nations considers one of the worst child protection crises in the world.

In a nation already plagued by hunger, the gangs have turned food into a weapon of war, cutting off farmers from their markets and populations from food stocks. For those who are hungry, gangs use food as a tool of recruitment. Erwan Rumen, deputy country director for WFP in Haiti, recounted how gang control in Cité Soleil had placed nearly 20,000 people in famine conditions when he arrived in 2023. Urban famine in the capital of a country is extraordinarily rare; in Haiti, it reflected not an absence of food so much as an absence of access. Today, more than half the population faces acute food insecurity.

Mass casualty plans

One of Port-au-Prince's few health facilities that is still standing, for now, is the privately run Fontaine Hospital Center in Cité Soleil, where staff and patients fled the same mid-May outbreak of violence as Wadline. Founded in 1991 by Jose Ulysse, Fontaine is a lifeline for 300,000 people living in what has become a near-total health-care desert.

While walking through Fontaine's courtyard, Ulysse recounted how the entire hospital scrambled to evacuate as gunshots grew louder and closer on May 10. It was the second time in two months they had been forced to do so. Eleven newborns in the intensive care unit were cradled out of the second-floor ward and into an improvised caravan of cars as caregivers tried to keep oxygen flowing. Eight of the hospital's maternity patients were transferred to the MSF Cité Soleil hospital down the road; some gave birth that night. None would stay long.

That same morning, Max Kowalski, MSF's acting field coordinator at its Cité Soleil hospital not far from Wadline's torched home, woke up hearing the stuttering drumbeat of machine guns getting closer. The wildfire of violence was within 200 meters (about 660 feet) of his facility.



The satellite imageries of the neighborhood of Solino in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 2021 and 2025 show the scale of the destruction, with buildings collapsed or missing their roofs as a result of gang violence.
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