

Haiti: Situation Report: Gangs and the Haitian State

This document provides an analysis of the current situation and the implications for aid agencies.

12 November 2021

As Haitian gangs grow in influence, the humanitarian space for NGOs is shrinking. As larger gangs' influence grows, the risks that NGOs and international personnel are targeted rises.

SUMMARY

- Armed gangs have controlled Haiti, especially the poorest districts of the capital Port-au-Prince, for many years.
- Gangs are seeking to fill the current void in governance and are capitalising on the chronic insecurity to build local support, particularly in Port-au-Prince's major slums.
- The largest and most powerful of the roughly 95 gangs battling for supremacy is at present the 'G9'.
- Port-au-Prince is currently the main area for gang related incidents – closely followed by its suburb Croix-des-Bouquets.
- Although there was a significant decrease in incidents in July, data from August and September show an increase in reported incidents, with the 400 Mawozo gang being at the centre of many events.
- NGO organisations experience the most significant threat from gangs in the capital, with G9 and other gangs controlling highway R2. Their increasing power has implications for logistics and access to the earthquake and hurricane-affected Tiburon peninsula.
- Kidnapping remains the most high-profile threat in Haiti, though it should be noted that poorer locals are targeted far more frequently than expatriates despite the far smaller ransom income.
- Losses from looted food warehouses amount to several million dollars in goods and equipment this year alone. Such lucrative attacks are **LIKELY** to continue.
- Further targeting of expatriate INGO workers or missionaries for kidnap/ransom, theft and extortion is **LIKELY** as the payment of ransoms encourages more attacks.
- Gangs will become ever more powerful and gang leaders such as Jimmy "Barbecue" Chérizier are **LIKELY** to gain more prominence and attempt to achieve official political recognition.



MITIGATIONS

- Maintain relations with gangs where possible and seek mediation with gangs if required.
- Consider opening offices outside of Port-au-Prince.
- Allow staff to work from home to reduce travel through town.
- Vary routes where possible, particularly when leaving Port-au-Prince for areas outside the capital, so as not to set a predictable pattern that would allow hostile actors to plan and prepare ambushes/attacks.
- Try to maintain a low visual profile. Obvious INGO/aid vehicles have been targeted.
- Ensure all deployed staff are covered by kidnap and ransom insurance and the appropriate supporting packages. Update proof-of-life questions.
- Carry effective communications equipment (and alternative back-up means of communication) as well as covert trackers and panic alarms.
- Ensure adequate trauma first aid packs are carried and staff trained in their use.

OVERVIEW OF HAITI GANGS

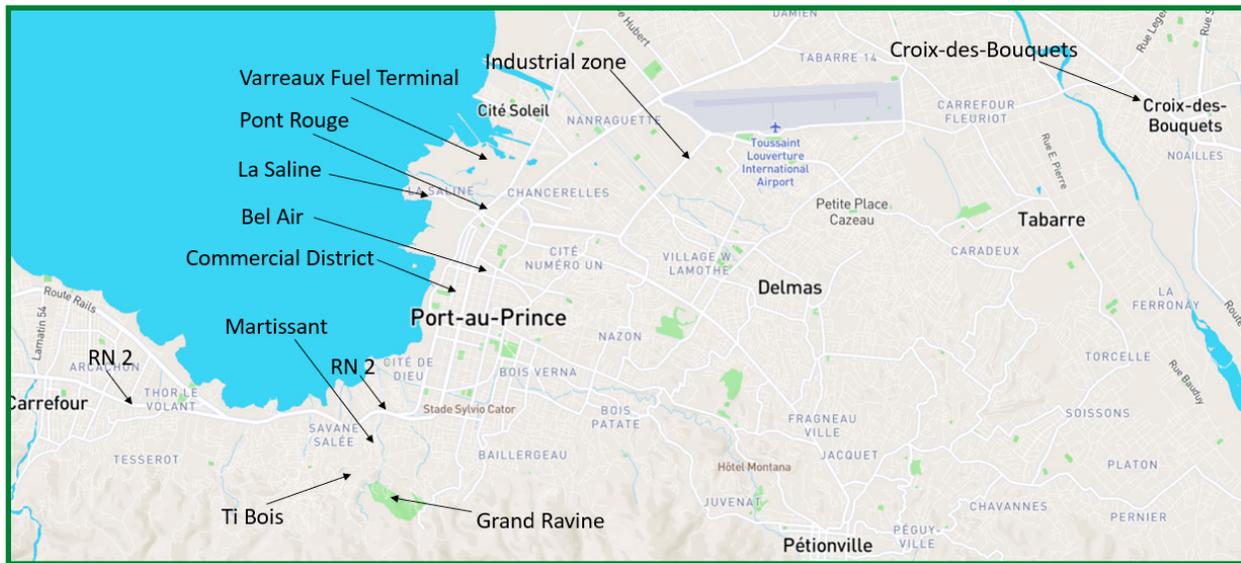
Armed gangs have controlled Haiti, especially the poorest districts of the capital Port-au-Prince, for many years. Gang culture can be traced back to the *tonton macoutes* of the Duvalier era (see below) whilst President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was believed to have contacts with the *chimeres* of Cite Soleil. Even before the July killing of President Jovenel Moïse, Haiti had one of the highest rates of kidnapping in the world. During Moïse's presidency, particularly in the last two years, armed gangs grew in power to control at least one third of the country, taking advantage of weakening state institutions. A United Nations peacekeeping mission helped contain some of the violence in the country between 2004 and 2019. Since the end of the mission and following the assassination of President Moïse, the lack of security has intensified, and rival gangs exploited the power vacuum and lawless situation to extend their control over other parts of Port-au-Prince and the surrounding area.

At least 328 kidnapping victims were reported to Haiti's police in the first eight months of 2021, compared with a total of 234 for all of 2020, according to a report issued in September by the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti. Other sources put the 2021 figure at over 600 kidnappings already, compared with 231 over the same period last year while the Center for Analysis and Research in Human Rights (CARDH) reported at least 782 known kidnappings in Haiti since January 2021.

Haiti has been through several cycles of chaos and political upheavals that resulted in the emergence and re-emergence of armed gangs and renewed criminal activity. The fall of the regime of Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc' Duvalier in 1986 was one such cycle that saw armed gangs developing into paramilitary structures whose activities transcended regular criminal activities and became more involved in the social and political life of Haiti. Several reports, including from the [New York Times](#), indicate that there has recently been a growing connection between armed gangs and the highest echelons of government and police in Haiti. Armed gangs are used by politicians to exert control and quash opposition, and powerful gang leaders aspire to official roles in government to gain more power and facilitate their criminal work. A group of armed gangs comprised of disbanded army soldiers and police officers known as ex-Fad'H/FADH (Forces Armées d'Haïti/The Armed Forces of Haiti) is an example of the synergy between the gangs and politics in Haiti. Ex-Fad'H helped overthrow President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's regime in 2004 and have recently occupied government and military properties across the country. However, recently the country has fallen into a new cycle of chaos following the July 2021 assassination of President Moïse.

Armed gangs and high-ranking politicians have also been involved in the illegal drug trade. Along with its neighbour on Hispaniola Island, the Dominican Republic, Haiti is a major transit point for cocaine and marijuana smuggled from Colombia to the US. Indeed, it is estimated that 8% of the cocaine smuggled into the US in 2006 came through the island. Shipments are usually smuggled onwards to Puerto Rico, where they are not subject to further customs inspection, or directly to Miami, Florida. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, senior military, intelligence and police officers were involved in drug trafficking in Haiti and the country became an internationally significant hub for the cocaine trade. According to a 1994 testimony to the U.S. Senate, a deal had been sealed between Michel François, commander of the Haitian police, and a major Colombian cartel. François and other military commanders were said to have protected 70,000 pounds of cocaine shipments in 1999. In the mid-1980s, the CIA attempted to combat drug-trafficking by creating and sponsoring a Haitian intelligence agency, the Service d'Intelligence Nationale (SIN), but the agency ended up mired in corruption and failed to achieve its objectives.

Main Gangs and Geographical Outreach



Map 1 Port-au-Prince locations referred to in this report

The main gangs seek to fill the current void in governance, capitalising on the chronic insecurity, corruption, and endemic violence to build local support, particularly in Port-au-Prince’s major slums. The resulting instability puts gangs in conflict both with each other and the security forces as they compete for territorial control, and have displaced over 13,000 from their homes in Port-au-Prince since 01 June alone, further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. The gangs’ territorial control led to the almost complete desertion of the commercial district in downtown Port-au-Prince by early June. Nonetheless, they have continued to attack businesses, stealing food, fuel and other supplies. Since then, a particular focus has been on gaining control over the industrial zone, especially the warehouses and factories along the road to the Toussaint Louverture International Airport.

Civilians have also been threatened, injured, sexually assaulted, or killed, and homes looted and burned. Sites targeted include a camp hosting hundreds of people with disabilities who found refuge there following the 2010 earthquake. Pierre Espérance, executive director of the Haitian National Human Rights Defense Network, said in June that gangs already controlled about 60% of the country’s territory, a proportion that has **LIKELY** since increased.

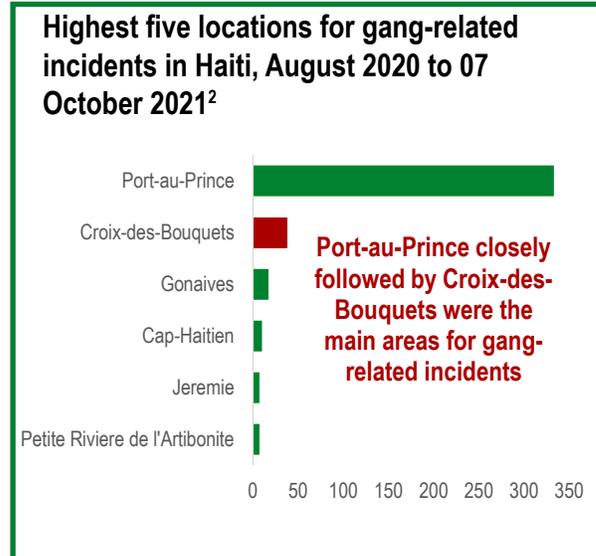
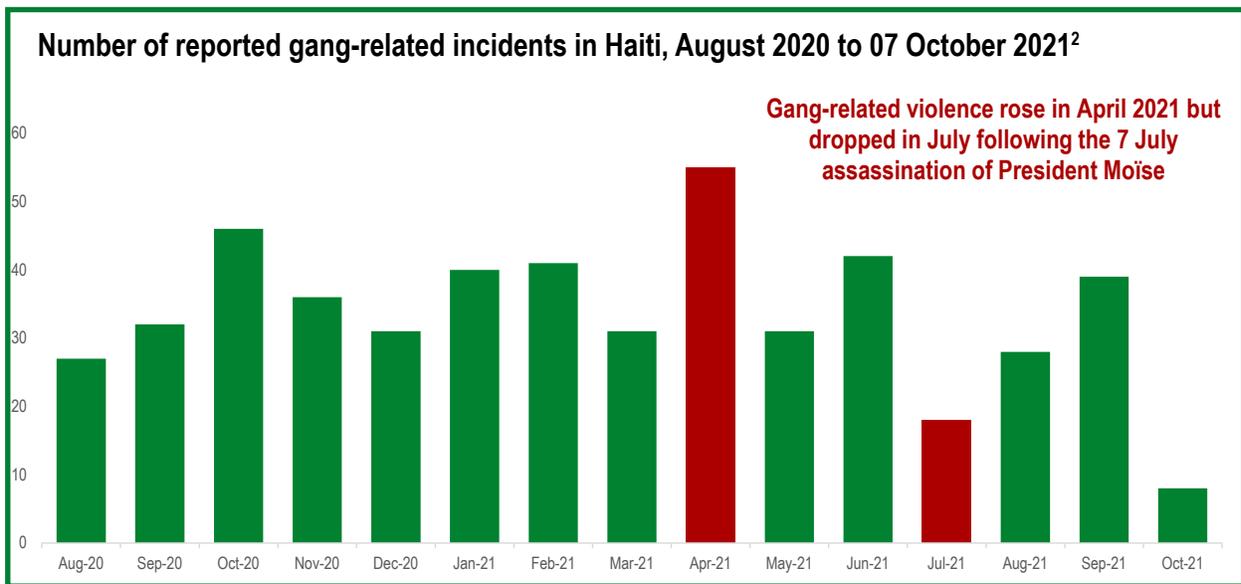
The largest and most powerful of the roughly 95 gangs battling for supremacy is currently the so-called G9 (formerly the Fanmi ak Alye or G9 Family and Allies). The G9 was a federation of nine gangs brokered and led by former police officer Jimmy Chérizier, aka “Barbecue” (because his mother was famous for her barbecued chicken rather than any more sinister activities) that was formed in June 2020. This alliance gave Chérizier control over all of Port-au-Prince’s downtown as well as the critical cross junctions leading to the north and south, and also the massive, opposition-dominated Cité Soleil and Bel Air slums.

Among the 30 or so other larger groupings are the Ti Lapli (which is opposed to G9 and controls the Grand Ravine area), the Krisla gang (now loosely allied to the G9 and controlling the Ti Bois) and the 400 Mawozo (responsible for the October kidnap of 12 US and Canadian missionaries and their families described below). 400 Mawozo has fought with the G9 and controls the commune of Croix-des-Bouquets, just east of the capital Port-au-Prince, recently expanding into Laboule 12 in conjunction with the Ti Lapli and other, smaller, anti-G9 gangs.

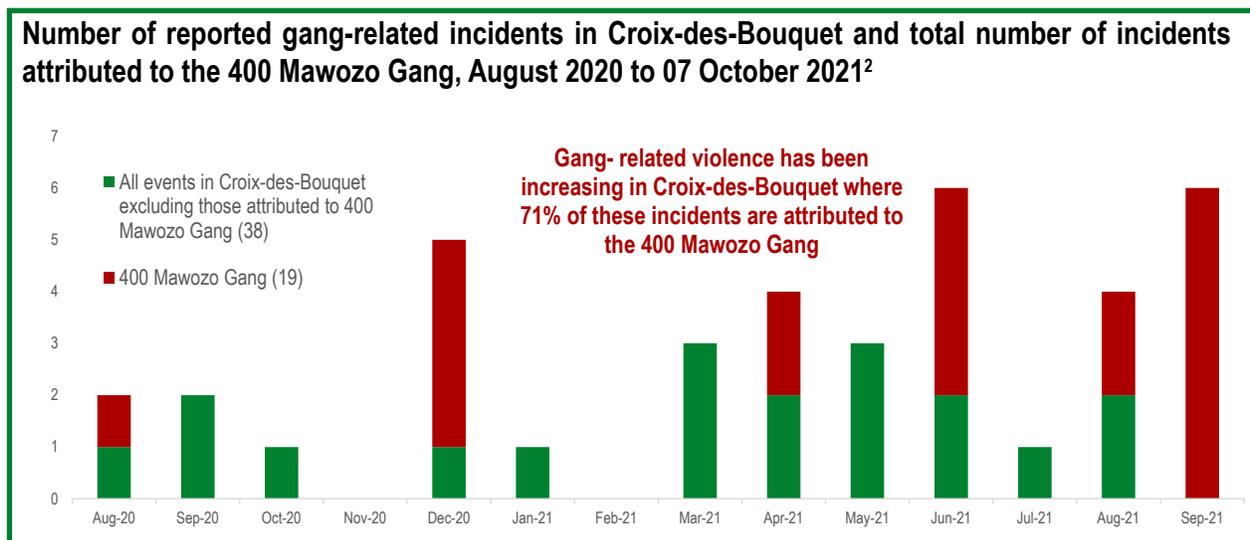


DATA ANALYSIS

- The number of reported incidents of gang-related violence¹ rose in April 2021 (around the time the five priests and two nuns were abducted) but dropped in July following the assassination of President Moïse (see graph below). One reason for this could be that the overall chaos surrounding the mysterious assassination of Moïse prevented reporting on gang violence.
- It is also **LIKELY** that some smaller gangs – not associated with either G9 or 400 Mawozo - have been more cautious following Moïse’s assassination, not wishing to be associated with the act, especially if the US had seen to become more involved in both Haiti and the investigation itself.
- The map below highlights that the majority of gang related incidents are carried out in Port-au-Prince, with fewer incidents in the surrounding countryside.
- The graph below highlights the main areas for gang related incidents – with Port-au-Prince closely followed by Croix-des-Bouquets.
- Gang-related violence has been rising in Croix-des-Bouquet, Ouest department where 70 percent of these incidents are attributed to the 400 Mawozo Gang.



One incident in particular that highlights the reach of 400 Mawozo is the kidnapping of 12 US and Canadian missionaries and family members, including five children (one an 8-month-old baby), on 16 October. It also reinforces the significant abduction threat in Haiti. The group were taken from a bus after visiting an orphanage in Croix-des-Bouquets, reportedly abducted on Route 8 while heading to Port-au-Prince's Toussaint Louverture airport to return home. The missionaries were working for the US-based Christian Aid Ministries which provides shelter, food and clothing to children and which supports education. The Haitian authorities have said that the gang has demanded USD 1 million each for their release, a total of USD 17 million. The area in which they were seized is controlled by the 400 Mawozo, which has been blamed for several other kidnappings this year, including that of five priests and two nuns, two of whom were French nationals, abducted in April and held for three weeks before being released. It is unknown if a ransom was paid.



Another incident that stands out is the abduction by an unspecified 'heavily armed group' of Professor Patrice Derenoncourt on 16 October. According to media reports, the professor was killed on 31 October despite his family having paid part of the US\$ 900,000 ransom. However, according to other information, the professor may have been injured during the kidnapping and suffered from diabetes and died in captivity due to lack of access to medication. That he was killed - despite part of the ransom being paid - is unusual as gangs normally like to release kidnapped victims in order to ensure a steady flow of cash.

This has direct implications for INGOs working in Port-au-Prince, as mitigation efforts will need to be higher, and therefore **LIKELY** more costly, than for those working in more rural areas. However, the **previous report** noted that Route 2 (see map on page 1) out of Port-au-Prince had seen gangs move to control this major transport route into the western countryside, with G9 having majority domination over R2.

With many humanitarian organisations concentrating their efforts in western Haiti following the catastrophic earthquake and hurricane, whilst gang related incidents are **LESS LIKELY** to happen in rural western Haiti, the control by G9 over R2 will remain a threat towards logistical supply movements from Port-au-Prince and Haiti's international airport towards the western Tiburon peninsula.



ANALYSIS

Kidnapping remains the most high-profile threat in Haiti, though it should be noted that poorer locals are targeted far more frequently than expatriates despite the far smaller ransoms achieved. Locally employed aid workers are at particular risk given the knowledge that they are linked to foreign organisations that may well pay to get their staff back. At least 25 aid workers have been kidnapped and six others killed in Haiti since 2010. Download this data on our [website](#) or on [HDX](#). Schools are also at risk of being targeted, with UNICEF reporting that gangs targeted schools for robbery or ransom.

The kidnapping culture seems mainly criminal at present. Media reports citing one locally employed aid worker (who was abducted in June) claim that an initial ransom of USD 1.1 million was demanded although the final ransom payment was USD 15,000. Other victims over recent weeks include senior bank executives, clergy from evangelical churches, nearly 20 doctors and the drivers of several fuel trucks (with their cargo also taken). The situation is now so bad that some residents only travel by boat to avoid gang-infested roads and areas. Route 2 out of Port-au-Prince is particularly notorious as gangs – especially 400 Mawozo and G9 - seek to control this strategic transport route.

Gangs' targets had shifted somewhat even before President Moïse's killing in July. Although attacks on rival shanty towns and abductions and killings of civilians have continued since June, gangs have also been attacking police stations, killing several officers, in recent months. This seems to be a deliberate move both to undermine the police – widely regarded as the most competent/effective part of the security forces (although that is relative by normal standards) – and to obtain more arms and munitions to equip their burgeoning numbers. Generally there is a real cynicism about the ability of the state to “hunt perpetrators to the gates of hell” as suggested by the President recently. Observers believe that Haitian Gangs do not fear the security forces. Gang members who joined after having served in the police and army, can act with impunity.

For example, human rights activists accused the new Haitian Chief of Police - Frantz Elbé – of police repression and human rights abuses dating back to 2000. Frantz Elbé had replaced Police Director General Léon Charles, who resigned a week earlier after less than a year in the job. He has been accused of links with a once powerful gang leader and kidnapper in the Croix-des-Bouquets area, Jean Elie “Ti Elie” Muller, and being the godfather to his son.

Losses from looted food warehouses already amount to several million dollars in goods and equipment this year and so these lucrative attacks also look set to continue. This is both to support the gangs' finances but also because control of supplies allows them to provide food and other aid to communities under their control, increasing local loyalty and dependence. Regular looting of supplies and stocks has affected the economy as well as health services.

- Fuel is now a concern in Haiti – as gangs have blocked access to terminals – in order to pressure PM Henry to step down – with reports of four tanker being seized and several truck drivers kidnapped
- Hospitals, schools, ambulances, public transportation among others have been hit hard, with a gallon of fuel up to \$15.

French medical charity Médecins Sans Frontières closed its health facility in Martissant (an area in southern Port-au-Prince crossed by the main road linking the capital to southern Haiti) in **late June** after doctors and patients were the target of an armed gang attack.

[DOWNLOAD DATA ON AID WORKERS KIDNAPPED IN HAITI SINCE 2010](#)

Gangs are also reportedly involved in narcotics trafficking with the US authorities plausibly claiming that many of the major gangs are “involved in drug and weapons trafficking and racketeering.”

Chérizier has tried to portray the G9 as a social movement fighting for better services and opportunities in poor neighbourhoods. Indeed, on 23 June this year, he told local media outlets in the slum of La Saline that it had become a “revolutionary force” to deliver Haiti from the opposition, the government, and the Haitian bourgeoisie. In reality, it is **LIKELY** a fragile coalition, large parts of which are merely seeking to exploit the political vacuum to gain impunity and sustain territorial control and which would **LIKELY** collapse if it was threatened by competent and effective security force and legal action. Further complicating this is the fact that the gangs (both now and historically) have been used as political instruments with political and as well as territorial objectives. There is a long history of this with former President Aristide, for example, distributing weapons to youth groups (known as bazes or bases) in exchange for their support. These gave the groups the wherewithal to commit crimes and dominate neighbourhoods.

Chérizier is linked to the Parti Haïtien Tèt Kale of recently assassinated President Moïse - he has been under US Treasury sanctions over his alleged involvement in the 2018 La Saline massacre while he was still a serving police officer, along with two of Moïse’s officials. Furthermore, the G9’s actions have generally focused on terrorising poor areas where opposition to the Parti Haitien Tet Kale runs deep. On 17 October, the G9 forced Prime Minister Ariel Henry and his security detail to flee an official commemoration in the capital’s Pont Rouge area. They then paraded in the official delegation’s place. Incidents like this have led some to suggest that Chérizier is manoeuvring to take over from Moïse. Then, on 28 October, the G9 blocked access to the Varreux fuel terminal (which provides 70% of Haiti’s supplies), causing severe fuel shortages in the capital and several other cities. This comes just a week after a 7-day strike by transport workers in protest at insecurity and lack of fuel, which saw streets blocked with burning tyres. Chérizier has demanded that Prime Minister Ariel Henry step down and the government pay over USD 50 million to restore access to the site. Henry replied that his government will not negotiate with gangs. Earlier, on 04 October, Foreign Minister Claude Joseph had called on the UN Security Council for help to tackle spirally crime and gang violence. There has been no formal response underlining the lack of international support for the current government.



PREDICTIONS

Gang Activities

- The killing of the abducted Professor Derencourt is a concerning new move in kidnappings and there may be further similar incidents.
- Despite the threat by 400 Mawozo towards the kidnapped US citizens – they are **MORE LIKELY** to be kept alive for ransom and because 400 Mawozo would be concerned about US retaliation should they kill the abducted missionaries. The ransom demanded for the US and Canadian missionaries will almost certainly be negotiated down (it normally is) although the US authorities will **LIKELY** pressure the Christian Aid Ministries (CAM) not to pay, standard practice in kidnap for ransom/terrorism cases. There will also be very real fears that any money paid would be used to buy more guns and munitions as well as supporting the political aims of 400 Mawozo leader Wilson Joseph. CAM will however **LIKELY** pay before leaving Haiti for a time and then come back.
- Further targeting of expatriate NGO workers or missionaries for kidnap/ransom, theft and extortion is **HIGHLY LIKELY** as the payment of ransoms encourages more attacks.

- It is also **LIKELY** that Route 2 out of Port-au-Prince will see an increase in attacks against aid workers, especially with the increasing control of G9 along the route.
- The political vacuum means that the power of the gangs is **LIKELY** to increase despite the internecine warfare between them. Gangs – especially G9 and 400 Mawozo will continue to expand their presence in Haiti – with further control of the fuel supplies and also **LIKELY** food, especially if the Chief of Police has links to gangs. Their hold over children via schools will also continue to spread.
- The overall number of gangs is **LIKELY** to drop as smaller gangs are defeated by or assimilated into the larger gangs which will become bigger and stronger. Gangs will become ever more powerful and gang leaders such as Jimmy “Barbecue” Cherizier are **LIKELY** to gain more prominence and attempt to work their way into official political roles, although sustaining such roles and earning international recognition will be very difficult. If international pressure for elections increases, G9 and the other politically linked groups will undoubtedly escalate their activity.
- Attacks on civilians and businesses will undoubtedly continue, triggering a further exodus of citizens.

Political Situation

- It is **UNLIKELY** that PM Henry will step down – unless forced to do so internally. It is **UNLIKELY** that in the short term Henry will be disposed in a coup – he has ensured so far that he is surrounded by loyalists. However, if the fuel and monetary crisis continue as is **HIGHLY LIKELY** – then the political pressure on him will increase. He will, however, try to hold onto power as long as possible – becoming increasingly oppressive in outlook.
- Foreign Minister Claude Joseph’s unanswered plea to the UN Security Council demonstrates that there is very little sign that the United Nations or the United States and the wider international community has the appetite to deploy the level of security forces necessary to restore civil order and contain the gangs. This is in part due to Washington and its allies’ ‘post-Afghanistan fatigue’ and their consequent fear of becoming embroiled in another foreign intervention, with the potential casualties that would entail. In addition, however, is the memory of the 2010 cholera epidemic, triggered by infected sewage from UN peacekeepers, which has killed at least 10,000 Haitians, as well as child sexual abuse by UN peacekeepers. These events mean that any foreign intervention is **UNLIKELY** to be welcomed by many Haitians. That said, the drug links of many of the gangs could see more US covert military and police activity linked to the DEA, and support for the civil police. A UN intervention, such as one that took place after Aristide, is **UNLIKELY** unless the drug flows out of Haiti would start to affect neighbouring countries to an unmanageable level.

Other Risks

- Small earthquakes will continue in the area – **UNLIKELY** in the short term to be a major one.
- There are HIGH risks of COVID-19 and other communicable diseases as IDPs are packed in ever more insanitary temporary accommodation and hospitals are already overrun with victims of the recent natural disasters.

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¹ Gang-related incidents: Refers to incidents where the perpetrator(s) or suspected perpetrator(s) was a member of a named or unnamed gang.

² This data is based on the **ACLED** (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project) data set for the period 01 August 2020 to 07 October 2021. **ACLED database attribution policy**. Accessed on 15 October 2021.