

UN urges states not to force Haitians to return to crisis-hit nation



United Nations, November 5 (RHC)-- The United Nations refugee chief has called on countries to suspend any forced returns of Haitians to their country, where gang violence and political instability are fuelling a humanitarian and security crisis.

In a statement issued in New York, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi appealed “to all states to stand in solidarity with Haiti and urge them not to return Haitians to a country that is extremely fragile.”

“Haitian women, children and men who are outside the country and returned to Haiti may face life-threatening security and health risks, and further displacement inside the country,” said the UN refugee agency, UNHCR.

Haiti has experienced months of escalating violence, as armed gangs battled for control in the political vacuum created by the July 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moise. Thousands of Haitians have left the country, as well as other host nations in the Americas region where they had been living under worsening conditions, in hopes of reaching the United States.

Many have taken dangerous trips by sea or trudged through a perilous jungle passage between Colombia and Panama, known as the Darien Gap. But the U.S. maintains strict restrictions at its southern border with Mexico, turning away most asylum seekers without offering them a chance to make a protection claim.

Last year, U.S. authorities carried out a “systematic mass deportation” of Haitians, prompting condemnation from rights groups and UN experts. Back in Haiti, in recent weeks powerful gangs have maintained a blockade of a key petrol terminal in the capital, Port-au-Prince, leading to dire shortages of fuel and water.

Hospitals have been forced to cut back on services due to a lack of electricity, which also is complicating the response to a new outbreak of cholera.

Haiti’s acting Prime Minister Ariel Henry last month asked the international community to help set up a “specialised armed force” to quell the violence – a call backed by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. Haitian civil society groups, however, have raised concerns at the prospect of a foreign force coming into the country, saying such interventions have historically brought more harm than good. But the situation on the streets of Port-au-Prince has continued to deteriorate and many say something needs to be done to protect residents.

The administration of U.S. President Joe Biden is working on a resolution to establish a “non-UN, international security assistance mission” in Haiti to respond to the crises. That initiative appears to have stalled, although Brian Nichols, the assistant US secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere, told reporters last week he was “very optimistic” countries would be able to come together.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken also said during a trip to Canada last week that discussions were ongoing to determine what countries would be willing to participate. “The purpose of any such mission would be to support the Haitian National Police in doing their jobs,” he said, “to make sure that the state once again actually controls the country, not gangs that right now are one of the biggest problems that we face in actually being able to move forward and help Haiti.”

In a separate statement earlier this week, the UN’s human rights chief Volker Turk said “urgent and sustained action” was needed. “People are being killed by firearms, they are dying because they do not have access to safe drinking water, food, healthcare, women are being gang raped with impunity. The levels of insecurity and the dire humanitarian situation have been devastating for the people of Haiti,” Turk said. The UN also warned that food insecurity is on the rise, with 4.7 million Haitians now facing “acute

hunger.”

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