

UN human rights chief calls on international powers to help Haiti

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At a press conference in the capital Port-au-Prince on Friday, UN human rights commissioner Volker Turk pressed the international community to take action [Odelyn Joseph/AP Photo]

Port-au-Prince, February 11 (RHC)-- The United Nations human rights chief has urged the international community to consider deploying a specialised armed force to Haiti, warning that violent gangs are creating a “living nightmare” for thousands of people.

The appeal from UN Human Rights Commissioner Volker Turk on Friday came at the end of a two-day visit to Haiti at the request of its government, which has found itself unable to control the gangs killing, raping and pillaging in a growing number of neighbourhoods. Violence has spiked in the impoverished country since the July 2021 assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse.

“It is time for the international community to help the Haitian authorities regain full control so this suffering can be stopped,” Turk said. He added that since multiple crises around the world are competing for attention, he feared “the situation in Haiti is not receiving the urgent spotlight that it deserves”.

Hours later, at an Organization of American States (OAS) meeting in Washington, DC, the United States government said it was continuing to discuss with international partners the possibility of sending a multinational force composed primarily of police.

Francisco Mora, the U.S. ambassador to the OAS, said his country was still working with others to build a framework to provide security and stability for Haiti, adding that Washington would also soon implement new sanctions and visa restrictions. Mora spoke after Haiti’s foreign minister, Jean Victor Génés, requested a specialised international force “be allowed to stand with us.” “There is a deepening crisis in the country that cries out for humanitarian aid,” he said.

The plea came as the UN Integrated Office in Haiti released a 24-page report on what it described as mass incidents of murder, gang rapes and sniper attacks in Cite Soleil, Haiti’s biggest slum, located in the capital of Port-au-Prince. “The findings of this report are horrifying,” Turk said. “It paints a picture of how people are being harassed and terrorised by criminal gangs for months without the state being able to stop it.”

The report said that from last July 8 to December 31, at least 263 people were killed and at least 57 women and girls were raped in just one neighbourhood in Cite Soleil known as Brooklyn. That area became ground zero for intense fighting between warring gangs.

During that time, the report said residents lived in “an almost permanent climate of terror due to the use of snipers that killed, at random, any person who passed in their field of vision.” Officials added that snipers would stand on schools and other buildings during broad daylight to attack innocent residents, with an average of six people killed or wounded every week. Among the targets were at least 17 women and several children, the youngest just eight years old.

Gang members also entered houses at random in rival territory, killing at least 95 people, including six children, one of whom was two years old, the report said. People who tried to flee the violence were killed at makeshift checkpoints.

“It is important to emphasise ... that this violence and these abuses are not committed randomly but are motivated by the interest of political actors in controlling territories,” the report said. Officials noted that three men were killed by one gang leader because they had been talking about the possibility of foreign military intervention, which Prime Minister Ariel Henry urgently requested in October to no avail. His request was issued amid a fuel terminal siege that shuttered gas stations and crippled life in Haiti.

The UN report blamed the violence on at least eight gangs, including Haiti’s largest, the G9 Family and Allies, a gang federation led by former police officer Jimmy Cherizier. It has been accused of blocking access to food and water in part by damaging public water mains and threatening to kill water truck drivers if they went to certain neighbourhoods.

As a result, the first cholera deaths in nearly three years were recorded in October 2022 in the Brooklyn neighbourhood, officials said. In a recent interview with The Associated Press, Cherizier denied the accusations, saying he was simply carrying out a “social fight.”

The report said warring gangs were using weapons, including assault rifles illegally smuggled into Haiti, and even relying on motorboats to attack rivals. The wave of violence has displaced tens of thousands of Haitians who remain homeless after their homes were bulldozed or set on fire, the report said.

The UN office urged local officials to hold elections, provide more training and equipment to a severely understaffed police department and arrest those responsible for “gross human rights abuses”.

It also once again called on the international community to urgently consider the deployment of foreign troops. “The issues are vast and overwhelming,” Turk said. “They need the international community’s attention.”

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