

UN human rights chief says Haiti dangling over an abyss



Police patrol the streets after gang members tried to attack a police station in Port-au-Prince, Haiti [File: Ralph Tedy Erol/Reuters]

United Nations, May 3 (RHC)--Lawlessness in Haiti amounts to a “human rights emergency,” the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has warned, urging immediate action as the Caribbean nation grapples with a spate of vigilante killings.

Speaking via video during a UN Security Council session on Wednesday, Volker Turk warned that Haiti is “dangling over an abyss.” “The state’s lack of capacity to fulfill human rights has completely eroded people’s confidence. The social contract has collapsed. The current lawlessness is a human rights emergency that calls for a robust response,” said Turk, who visited the country in February.

“There is an immediate need to support Haiti’s institutions by deploying a time-bound, specialised and human rights-compliant support force, with a comprehensive action plan,” he said. “The longer-term challenge, of course, is to build robust institutions that deliver on human rights.”

Gang violence has surged across the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince in recent months, fuelled in part by the power vacuum created following the July 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moise.

Haiti’s de facto leader, Prime Minister Ariel Henry, whom Moise chose for the post just days before he was killed, has faced a crisis of legitimacy. Attempts to chart a political transition for Haiti have failed, and a lack of functioning state institutions has made stemming the violence more difficult.

Deadly clashes have impeded access to healthcare facilities, forced the closure of schools and clinics, and worsened already dire food insecurity by cutting residents of gang-controlled areas off from critical supplies.

Last week, the head of the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH), Maria Isabel Salvador, said 1,674 homicides, rapes, kidnappings and lynchings were reported in the first quarter of 2023.

That is up from 692 such incidents in the same period a year earlier, said Salvador, citing data collected by BINUH and the Haitian National Police (HNP).

The humanitarian group Mercy Corps also recently warned that the country was on the “brink of civil war”, with many residents starting to question, “Why not seek revenge and take justice into their own hands?”

Last week, a mob lynched at least 13 suspected gang members who had been arrested in Port-au-Prince. The Associated Press reported this week that five more men were killed and set on fire on Tuesday by a crowd of people in Jalousie, an impoverished area outside of Port-au-Prince.

Referencing people who were in the crowd, the news agency said most of the bodies were left along a road leading to former President Moise’s home, while one was left outside a police station in Pétienville, a suburb of the capital. “It’s horrible for them to be killed in front of the eyes of the police,” Jean Marc Etienne, who was in a park in front of the police station and witnessed what happened, told the AP. “That shows nobody is safe, that anybody can be killed.”

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