

United Nations statistics underscore extreme brutality of Haiti's gangs



United Nations, September 1 (RHC)-- The United Nations has decried the “extreme brutality” unfolding in Haiti, releasing new statistics that sketch out the scope of the country’s ongoing violence. An estimated 2,439 people have died between January and August 15 of this year, according to a press briefing.

A further 902 people have been injured, and 951 kidnapped, as the Caribbean country contends with widespread gang violence and vigilantism.

The violence stems from a combination of factors, including political and economic instability. The Haitian government has long contended with systemic corruption, and in 2021, gunmen entered the residence of

President Jovenel Moise and shot him to death.

Prosecutors in the United States have since tied the assassination to a plot to supplant Moise with a figure more sympathetic to the suspects' political and business interests.

But Moise's death left a power vacuum. No federal elections have been held in years, and Haiti's last democratically elected senators saw their terms expire in January. Haiti's economy has also been stymied by political crises and natural disasters like drought, hurricanes, floods and the deadly 2010 earthquake, leading to food shortages and other issues.

Amid these crises, gangs have moved to take control over large areas of the country, including nearly 60 percent of the capital Port-au-Prince.

During a recent press briefing, Ravina Shamdasani, a spokesperson for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, recounted how – in the last few days alone – acts of violence have shaken the country.

In the late-night hours of August 14, "a local municipal representative, his wife and child were shot and killed in their house in the Decayette neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince by alleged gang members," she said.

Hours earlier, "five men and two women from the same family were burned alive when their home in the Carrefour-Feuilles neighbourhood was set on fire by the Grand Ravine gang." In both cases, Shamdasani explained, the victims had allegedly expressed support for community self-defense groups that have organized against the gangs.

But those self-defence groups and other "popular justice" movements have given rise to vigilante violence. Since late April, more than 350 have been lynched in such efforts, including a police officer and people who have no gang affiliation.

A recent escalation in violence in some neighbourhoods in the capital has led to mass displacement, Shamdasani added. "Some 5,000 people have fled these neighbourhoods since last weekend and are either sheltering in improvised sites or with host communities, often in dire circumstances and still vulnerable to attack," she said.

Haiti's Prime Minister Ariel Henry has repeatedly requested international intervention to help quell the violence. On July 29, Kenya accepted to lead a proposed multinational effort to Haiti and send 1,000 police officers to the embattled country.

But Jimmy Cherizier, the leader of the G9 Family and Allies gang alliance, warned that he would fight back if the international force committed human rights abuses. "We will fight against them until our last breath," he said. "It will be a fight of the Haitian people to save the dignity of our country."

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