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# **CHAOS IN HAITI: U.S. URGE A POLITICAL TRANSITION SHOULD BEGIN**

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Caribbean Research Center  
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### **Cover Photo: Haiti Prime Minister Ariel Henry; United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken**

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## **Chaos in Haiti: U.S. Urge A Political Transition Should Begin**

The government of Haiti declared a state of emergency on Sunday evening March 3, 2024, in the aftermath of violent encounters in the capitol city of Port-au-Prince which led to two prison breaks as major gang leaders sought to overthrow Prime Minister Ariel Henry. The two jail breaks allowed more than 3,000 dangerous criminals, including murderers and kidnappers, to escape back on to the streets of the violence-stricken nation. The Associated Press, Reuters (2024) reported that Prime Minister Henry was out of state, meeting with United Nations officials (UN) to salvage support for UN-backed security forces to stabilize his country. The emergency decree was issued after a deadly weekend that marked a new low in Haiti's spiral of violence, and which has led the United States (U.S.) to advise its citizens to leave "as soon as possible" and led Canada to temporarily close its embassy. Rivers, Lash (2024) stated that the U.S. State Department encouraged American citizens on March 7, 2024, to leave Haiti following an ongoing wave of gang violence, led by former police officer Jimmy Chérizier, alias "Barbecue."

The U.S. Embassy in Haiti on their official website, has a warning advising citizens to monitor local news and information on security conditions, look for commercial transportation providers and to make arrangements to leave Haiti when security conditions and commercial transportation options permit doing so. The latest crisis has led U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken to urge Haitian Prime Minister Dr. Ariel Henry to begin a political transition that would lead to free and fair elections.

## **U.S. Supports CARICOM Proposal To Expedite A Political Transition**

On March 7, 2024, Secretary of State Blinken spoke with Haitian Prime Minister Henry to discuss the ongoing political, security, and humanitarian crisis in Haiti, according to State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller. Miller (2024) stated that the political crisis in Haiti, combined with escalating violence and civil unrest, has created an unsustainable situation that threatens the country's citizens and security. In his conversation with Prime Minister Henry, Secretary Blinken gave his support to a proposal created in partnership with The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and Haitian stakeholders to streamline a political transition, through the creation of a broad-based, independent presidential college to steer the country toward the deployment of a Multinational Security Support mission and free and fair elections. Miller revealed that Secretary Blinken encouraged Prime Minister Henry to give serious consideration to the proposal in the interest of restoring peace and stability to his country, which would also allow the Haitian people to resume their normal lives, free of violence.

CARICOM leaders, seeking a diplomatic solution to the ongoing crisis, pushed Prime Minister Henry to resign at their annual CARICOM Summit held in Georgetown, Guyana on February 25-28, 2024, seeing him as a hindrance to progress in the country. Timmerman (2024) reported that Antigua and Barbuda Prime Minister Gaston Browne called on Henry to "step aside" and allow for efforts to continue unimpeded in finding a solution to the socio-economic and political situation in Haiti. The Haitian leader however, resisted calls for his resignation and agreed to hold elections by August, 2025. Johnston (2024) reported that Henry would remain Prime Minister following more than 25 hours over three days discussing the Haitian crisis at the summit in Guyana. Present at the discussions were the CARICOM leaders and diplomats from the United Nations, U.S., Canada, and France, as well as Brazilian president Lula da Silva. Haitians were simply alerted,

after two-plus years of progress-resistant political negotiations, Johnston stated, that Henry would be sticking around another two years through the long-delayed electoral process.

### **Who is Jimmy Chérizier**

Jimmy Chérizier, alias “Barbecue,” is one of Haiti’s most notorious gang leaders. A former police officer, he is best known for creating the G9 and Family: a criminal federation of nine powerful gangs in Haiti’s capital of Port-au-Prince. Chérizier, by his own account, earned the alias “Barbecue” due to his heinous habit of incinerating his victims. Founded in 2020, the coalition allows member gangs to expand their territory and offers politicians a weapon to suppress their opposition. Insight Crime (2023) reported that G9’s main source of revenue to fund their gang activities includes a stream of extortion, such as protection payments on local businesses, street vendor stands, and public transportation drivers, while also overseeing kidnapping for ransom of civilians. The gang has also gained control of the public utility sector, electricity and water, and allow these entities to continue their operations in exchange for payments to the gangs. Chérizier life of crime began when he was a police officer. Insight Crime reports that he was a part of an anti-gang operation which resulted in the extrajudicial killing of at least nine innocent civilians in the Grand Ravine neighborhood of Port-au-Prince.

In November 2017, while still a police officer, Chérizier allegedly led a group of seven gangs in a massacre in the La Saline neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, one of Haiti’s worse massacres where more than 71 people were kill. Witnesses observed that he was actively engaged in conversation with gang leaders during the operation. Subsequently, Chérizier, a month later, was fired from the police force and a warrant was issued for his arrest. He avoided arrest and proceeded to partake in a four-day attack on Port-au-Prince’s Bel-Air neighborhood in November 2019. The attack resulted in members of four different gangs setting homes on fire and killing over 24 people. Al Jazeera (2022) reported that the UN Security Council voted unanimously on October 21, 2022 to impose sanctions on Chérizier, which established a mechanism to punish individuals and groups that threaten the peace, security or stability of Haiti. He was the first person to face sanctions under this UN resolution.

### **Where is Prime Minister Ariel Henry**

Prime Minister Henry is currently “locked out” of his country as he struggles to remain in power. Gang violence have closed Haiti’s Toussaint Louverture International Airport. Coto (2024) reported that Prime Minister Henry, as of Wednesday March 6, 2024, remains in Puerto Rico where he landed the day before after he was barred from landing in neighboring Dominican Republic. Officials there closed the airspace to flights to and from Haiti. The Prime Minister has been notably absent since the country’s latest and most serious outbreak of violence started last week. Henry has remained silent about the crisis in his country as he crisscrosses the world, from South America to Africa, with no announced date of return. Sanon, Goodman, Coto (2024) reported that Prime Minister Henry was last seen Friday in Kenya on a mission to salvage a multinational security force from the east African nation was set to lead under the auspices of the United Nations. He left Haiti more than a week prior to attend a meeting of Caribbean leaders in Guyana. Locked out of his country for now, Henry appears to face an impasse as a growing number of officials call for his resignation or nudge him toward it. Hu et al. (2024) reported that U.S. State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said the U.S. is not calling on (Henry) or pushing for him to resign but added that we are urging him to expedite the transition to an empowered and inclusive

governance structure to prepare for the multinational security mission and eventually for elections. U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said that the U.S. have asked Prime Minister Henry to do what is necessary to move forward on a political process that will lead to establishment of a presidential transitional council that will lead to elections.

### **Current Violence in Haiti and The U.S. View**

Criminal gangs under Chérizier, more powerful than Haiti's state security forces it appears, have attacked prisons and the airport serving the country's capital, and forced businesses and schools to close, driving an estimated 15,000 people from their homes in Port-au-Prince. The latest episode of major violence flared up on February 29, 2024 as Prime Minister Henry flew to Kenya to push for the UN backed deployment of a police force to help fight the gangs. The Haitian government decreed a state of emergency will run until April 3, 2024 in the country's West Region and the capital Port-au-Prince and a curfew will remain in force until March 10, 2024. The chaos in Haiti has forced tens of thousands of people to flee their homes in the past few days, adding to the more than 300,000 already displaced by gang violence.

Rios et al. (2024) reported that two police stations near Haiti's National Palace were attacked by armed individuals Friday night March 8, 2024, as gang violence in the Caribbean nation's capital of Port-au-Prince continued to spiral downward into chaos. The capitol city of Port-au-Prince has been gripped by a wave of extremely coordinated gang attacks on law enforcement and state institutions in what gang leader Chérizier has described as an attempt to overthrow Prime Minister Ariel Henry's government. Armed groups have burned down and destroyed police stations and released thousands of inmates from two prisons. Chérizier has promised that "a civil war that will end in genocide" if Prime Minister Henry does not step down. The authors stated that the head of Doctors without Borders in Haiti said she is concerned about the civilian dislocation, and the lack of basic necessities. "There is no toilet available, no shower available, no water available...they cannot stay for long," Sophie Mealier told the authors.

The latest round of violence in Haiti erupted as Prime Minister Henry was out of the country seeking UN assistance Haiti's police force to fight gang violence. CBS News (2024) reported that Finance Minister Patrick Boivert, acting prime minister in Henry's absence from the country, declared a state of emergency on March 3, 2024 and said officials were imposing an evening curfew to "take appropriate measures in order to regain control of the situation." There are over 200 gangs in Haiti, with 23 of the most violent ones wreaking havoc on and operating in Port-au-Prince. These gangs control roughly 80 percent of the capitol city. CBS News stated that these gangs maintain a high degree of military precision that 10 years ago because of their ability to acquire high-caliber weapons.

A 2023 UN report stated that recovered weapons destined for Haitian ports included ".50 caliber sniper rifles, .308 rifles, and even belt-fed machine guns." The President Joe Biden administration, working for months to rally the international community to support this besieged nation, has expressed alarm at the deterioration of the country in recent days and have express grave concern. At Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre's daily briefing (The White House 2024), National Security Communications Advisor Adm. John Kirby (ret.) stated that this was not a safe time for Americans to be in Haiti right...we can all recognize that this is in our interest as well as the region's interest and certainly the interests of the Haitian people to get a more stable, calm, secure environment there. Jean-Pierre also stated that for some time now for CARICOM, and our Haitian partners, to

see how we find the path forward to restoring democratic order in Haiti through free and fair elections is a priority.

U.S. lawmakers warn of a catastrophic situation in Haiti if these gangs are able to get greater control of the nation. Berg, Nahal (2024) reported that U.S. Representative Yvette Clark (D-N.Y.) co-chair of the House Haiti Caucus stated that the instability of one country impacts all the countries around it...The Dominican Republic has already closed its borders. The U.S. and Caribbean nations will bear the brunt of those who are just trying to survive in the midst of what's taking place. The roughly 9,000 Haitian police officers providing security for more than 11 million people are often overwhelmed and outgunned, according to the United Nations...Haiti's National Police may only last another week or so in fighting off the gangs. U.S. Representative Ayanna Pressley (D-Mass.), who co-chairs the Haiti Caucus with Clarke, told POLITICO that the U.S. must prioritize the establishment of a representative transitional government in Haiti, and provide urgent humanitarian relief. Half of Haiti's population, or about 5.5 million people, need humanitarian assistance, according to the UN.

### **Three Final Takeaways Abouts The Current Crisis in Haiti**

As Haiti continues in a state of emergency, gangs have attacked the capital city's most important prisons, releasing thousands of inmates. The country's airport is under siege, and it was still not clear when Haiti's de facto prime minister will make it back into the country. Peralta (2024) reported that gangs paraded throughout Port-au-Prince with their arms openly. It was not done at night and the police was nowhere to be found. Three takeaways about this latest round of violence in Haiti:

1. Bouts of violence in Haiti were marked by fights between gangs. This time, the gangs in Haiti have forged an alliance and at least one of the big gang leaders, former police officer Jimmy Chérizier, has said explicitly that the point of this violence is to overthrow the government. Working together, the gangs have flexed a powerful muscle. They already controlled most of the capital city.
2. Haiti's Prime Minister Henry is currently not in the country, which makes the situation more difficult without the country's leader on the ground to lead the resistance to the gang violence. In fact, when the violence broke out, it was Patrick Boisvert, the country's finance minister who was acting as prime minister, who signed the emergency declaration.
3. Kenyan police are still seen as the way out of this crisis. Speaking to reporters the State Department's Miller said the crisis underscores the urgency of finalizing the Kenyan-led mission. On Friday March 8, 2024, Prime Minister Henry and Kenyan President William Ruto witnessed the signing of a bilateral agreement authorizing the deployment of 1,000 Kenyan police officers to Haiti. Ruto said the signing of the agreement was the final step and that his police force would be there at the earliest opportunity that is possible.

Chaos continues on the streets of Port-au-Prince as the city descends into lawlessness. Violence surged over the weekend, March 9-11, 2024, as gangs attacked the National Palace and set part of the Ministry of the Interior on fire with gasoline bombs. Prime Minister Henry remains stuck in

Puerto Rico and was refused permission to land Haiti's neighbor, The Dominican Republic. With the absence of the Prime Minister to lead the response to the violence, the government remains in disarray as the gangs' control over the capital city nears 80 percent. Grant (2024) reported that the U.S. State Department requested that all non-essential personnel be airlifted out of Haiti. Not long after, Germany's ambassador and several European Union diplomats fled the country. The police force is outnumbered and demoralized. CARICOM called for an emergency meeting for Monday March 11, 2024 in Jamaica to address the crisis. Heads of government from The Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. The Caribbean organization also invited eight international partner countries including the United States, France, Canada, United Nations Officials, and Brazil to the meeting.

Richards (2024) reported that Jamaica Prime Minister Holness affirmed the importance of welcoming his CARICOM colleague heads and representatives of key international development partners who have been focused on supporting the people of Haiti through the multifaceted crises. The State Department announced on Monday March 11, 2024 that Secretary of State Blinken will travel to Jamaica to attend High Level Meeting on Haiti. Miller (2024) stated in a press release that the Secretary will discuss the proposal developed in partnership with CARICOM and Haitian stakeholders to expedite a political transition in Haiti through the creation of a broad-based, independent presidential college as well as the deployment of a Multinational Security Support Mission to address the ongoing security crisis.

The President Biden Administration's support for Prime Minister Henry seems to have eroded as the U.S. has now publicly called for the Prime Minister to return to Haiti to step aside and to begin a transition to a new government. U.S. diplomats admit privately however, that Prime Minister's Henry's return to the country may serve to further destabilized Haiti, making it almost impossible for him the return. On Sunday March 10, 2024, the U.S. State Department issued statement reinforcing that the Travel Advisor for Haiti remains at Level Four: Do Not Travel to Haiti. The U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince stated that the current security situation in Haiti is unpredictable and dangerous, and that they are aware that there some noncommercial options to depart Haiti safely. As these options become available, the Embassy urge U.S. citizens to take advantages of the opportunity to leave the country.

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