

HAITI

Kenyan police add violence to ongoing chaos

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Every year many religious are attacked, kidnapped, killed not in hatred of the faith, but because they accept the risks involved in living and witnessing to the faith in critical situations, characterised by economic and cultural poverty, moral and environmental degradation, where there is no respect for life and human rights, but only oppression and violence is the norm.

The Fides news agency, which publishes an annual dossier on their situations, explains that they are shot while engaged in everyday tasks: on the street, on their way to or from celebrating Mass or carrying out their pastoral activities, or at home, in their parishes, in their monasteries, during an assault for robbery or kidnapping. They could go elsewhere, to safer places, or suspend their commitments, reduce them, but they don't, even though they are aware of the dangers they face every day. This is because they want to remain close to the faithful entrusted to them.

For years, this has been the situation for priests, missionaries living in Haiti, a country where violence and corruption are rampant, where living conditions continue to deteriorate. This has been especially the case since 2021. It's the year marked by the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse on July 7, followed the following month by a new, catastrophic earthquake, although less devastating than the one that in 2010 had caused 230,000 deaths. Since then misery and lawlessness have taken over, and by now the population is hostage to hundreds of vicious, ruthless armed gangs.

In the capital Port-au-Prince alone there are about 300 gangs controlling 80 percent of the territory. The religious, the native ones and the many foreign missionaries, are well liked by the common people for the good they receive from them and yet they are often victims of attacks, robberies, thefts, and kidnappings for extortion. Their proven, generous dedication to the people does not guarantee their safety, nor are their properties and institutions: kindergartens, schools, orphanages, and hospitals, which increasingly represent for much of the population the only services they can count on.

Last March, the situation worsened. Prime Minister Ariel Henry's decision to hold elections in August 2025 unleashed the fury of the armed groups that control the Haitian capital and its suburbs. Although rivals, they joined forces to demand the prime minister's resignation. Since then, police stations, government offices and even Toussaint Louverture International Airport have been targets of attacks. Schools, hospitals, orphanages, banks, public buildings and many businesses have been looted. Tens of thousands of people have had to leave their homes to seek refuge away from

urban centres often in inhumane conditions. Among other things, two prisons have also been attacked and some 4,000 prisoners have been released, all thugs who have gone on to swell the ranks of the gangs.

"The situation is terrifying, " Sister Marcella Catozza, a Franciscan who has been involved in pastoral and charitable activities in Haiti for many years explained to Fides last March, "the gangs have attacked several public buildings, including the Catholic hospital 'St. Francis de Sales' in Port-au-Prince. Bear in mind that they are equipped with sophisticated weapons and means, machetes are nothing in comparison; they even have drones to detect the movements of the security forces who appear unable to stop them." Since then, news from the country at the mercy of the uncontrolled rampage of armed gangs has become increasingly dramatic.

"The gangs are more armed and more vicious every day; we are barricaded inside the Hospital, hoping they will not assault us. We cannot go out to buy food or medicines for the people we house, disabled children, the sick, relatives of the hospitalised and the medical and nursing staff," Father Erwan, a Camillian missionary and bursar of Foyer St. Camillus, a social-health centre, reported in April. "They allowed us, upon 'payment of protection money, to go out once with the ambulance to buy 30 oxygen cylinders for the hospitalised and for surgeries. The situation is more dangerous every day."

"It is most urgent for the international community to intervene," said Father Massimo Miraglio, a Camillian missionary who has also been on the island for nearly 20 years, "otherwise we will reach a point of no return and the dead will number in the thousands.

The international community, it is known, is slow to act and has priorities, but Haiti does not seem to be one of them at the moment. More importantly, when it decided to intervene, it did so by surprisingly choosing to entrust the task of restoring order and peace in Haiti to Kenya, which as early as July 2023 offered to send 1,000 police officers to Port-au-Prince and to head an eventual international mission. "We will disarm those thugs and gangs," Kenyan Foreign Minister Alfred Mutua assured in September 2023, "it won't take long, we will free the kidnapped Haitians and the raped women. "We will not let the Haitian people down," Kenyan President William Ruto promised for his part, "the mission has 'special significance and fundamental urgency.'

But not everyone in Kenya was, and is, in agreement with depriving themselves of the elevated number of police officers needed to deal with the country's many serious law and order problems. The opposition led by Raila Odinga spoke out against it,

saying that sending officers to Haiti should not be a priority given the many problems in the countries that border Kenya, and in October, and again in January 2024, the Supreme Court, despite the favourable opinion given by parliament, blocked the project, arguing that the constitution does not provide for sending police officers abroad, only military personnel.

It was not until late March, just as the situation in Haiti was escalating, that the situation was unblocked, and it was not until May that President Ruto announced that the first contingent of policemen would finally arrive in Port-au-Prince, within three weeks.

In the many months since July 2023, the entirely well-founded objection has often been made from many quarters that the Kenyan police were not the best suited to handle a situation as complex and delicate as Haiti's where it is not always easy to distinguish gang members, the "thugs," from civilian victims, and where thousands of young people choose to arm themselves siding with the strongest and to stop suffering, to stop being afraid: "most young people today are armed and it is thanks to this that they eat and drink," they explain in Haiti.

In fact, Kenya's police do not seem to be the best choice because they are known for their brutality and have often been accused of kidnapping, torture, and extrajudicial killings. But no one has seriously considered this. The fact remains that, with the blessing of the international community, the first 200 police officers landed in Haiti on June 25, in the very same hours that their colleagues back home in the capital Nairobi and in other cities applying deadly force shooting at thousands of young people protesting tax increases, killing at least 23 and injuring dozens.