



Summary

Preliminary protection assessment in gang-controlled areas of Port-au-Prince (February 2022)

1- Context

In 2021, the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince experienced an unprecedented and rapid expansion of gang violence which aggravated the humanitarian crisis endured by the country. According to estimates, between 1 million and 3.5 million people have borne the brunt of this violence and have seen their protection situation worsened. Against this background, in November and December 2021, an assessment was carried out by the co-lead of the Protection sector in Haiti, with the support of OCHA

2- Main Findings

Citizens are suffering from direct physical and mental harm as a consequence of gang-armed violence, which has also infiltrated the local economy and taken control of basic services.

➤ Casualties and kidnappings

Between January and December 2021, the number of casualties and kidnappings as a result of gang violence in the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince exceeded by far those of 2019 and 2020 combined. According to the Haitian National Police (HNP), between January and December 2021, at least 2,344 people were killed, injured or kidnapped¹. Men comprise the majority of victims (86 per cent or 2,016 individuals), followed by women (10 per cent or 234 individuals) and children as young as 5 years old (4 per cent or 94 individuals).

This can be partly explained by a rise in the number of incidents involving gangs as well as by an augmentation of incidents in which people were directly shot at by gang elements, as opposed to previous periods when victims were rather caught in crossfire. For example, between July and August in the communal section of Martissant, there were three targeted attacks against buses transporting passengers and private vehicles, resulting in 23 people killed and 26 wounded. Another example is the use of snipers shooting indiscriminately at people from watchtowers or roof buildings, in particular during fights between rival gangs to control territory. According to local analysts, this change in the modus operandi of gangs intends to instill terror amongst local populations and force their allegiance.

As for the kidnappings reported to the Haitian National Police, which remain under-reported, there was a steep increase. While 78 and 235 cases were reported in 2019 and 2020 respectively, the number of kidnappings reached 655 in 2021, confirming that this practice has become one of the main sources of income for gangs such as 400 Mawozos, which operates from the communal section of Croix-des-Bouquets. Men account for the majority of the victims while women and girls abducted are most likely raped during their captivity. Most people are released against exorbitant ransoms although some kidnapped people remain unaccounted for.

➤ Sexual violence

Sexual and gender-based violence is used by the gangs as a weapon to humiliate, terrorize and reinforce their control over the local populations. Sexual violence involving gangs remains largely under-reported,

¹ At the national level, during the same period, at least 2,781 people were killed, injured or kidnapped.



to the extent that victims have become invisible to the eyes of many. However, information collected during the assessment mission indicates that since June 2021, on average 75 victims per month, including children as young as 2 years old, have been subjected to rape and sexual violence in Port-au-Prince. Women and girls account for the high majority of the victims. Boys were also reported among the victims, particularly in contexts of initiation rituals to become gang members. A high level of brutality and ruthlessness was described by rape victims and their family members. In some areas, the feeling of impunity is so pervasive that rapes have been perpetrated in broad daylight. Against this backdrop, police and judicial responses are extremely weak and ineffective.

➤ *Violence-induced displacement and control of freedom of movement*

Since March 2020, armed violence has forced at least 19,000 people to leave their homes and seek refuge in makeshift sites, public buildings and at the home of family members across the capital. A deliberate strategy of destruction of properties to displace residents for criminal territorial gain was also documented. The displaced population, mostly women, children, the elderly and persons with disabilities, faces dire humanitarian challenges due to their vulnerability. Additionally, in areas where gangs have a grip on the population, mobile checkpoints have been manned by armed elements to control and restrict the movements of their inhabitants in and out the neighbourhoods.

➤ *Severe impact of access to basic services*

Access to basic services has not been spared either by gang violence. Healthcare facilities have been forced to close or reduce their activities due to insecurity and the disruption of fuel distribution (particularly in October and November 2021), negatively impacting access to medical care for thousands of people living in gang-controlled areas. Since 2020, in addition to the relocation of the long-established *Médecins Sans Frontières* clinic outside Martissant, at least 10 main hospitals and health centers established in marginalized areas closed down or significantly reduced their services

Similarly, access to education has been severely affected by armed violence. Although only incomplete data is available about the number of schools which have been forced to close or to be relocated outside gang-controlled areas, in October 2021, at least 5,000 children living in Martissant were not able to resume school because of turf war between gangs. Some school directors have managed to continue to operate in gang-controlled areas, such as in Croix-des-Bouquets, often in exchange of paying “taxes” to gang leaders for security. On the other hand, some reports indicate that gangs were opening their own makeshift schools. By impacting the normal functioning of schools, armed violence has led thousands of children to drop out of school. Among the latter, some have become potential recruits for gangs which offer them a sense of purpose, an opportunity for a short-lived more enjoyable life.

➤ *Infiltration of the local economy*

Furthermore, gangs have steadily infiltrated the local economy through extortion, rackets, and the stealing of trucks transporting goods or fuel, which have become the means par excellence for several gangs to reinforce their social and territorial control. Gang elements have reportedly infiltrated the local economy by compelling local businesses, such as petrol stations, to place their elements on their payroll. These elements then play the role of informants to identify potential targets.



Not only extortion and levies affect authority revenues and prevent businesses from building up, but they also fuel inflation, negatively affect the purchasing power of households living in these areas and contribute to food insecurity. For instance, some areas of the metropole controlled by the gangs present IPC Phase 4 pockets.

3- Main recommendations

In light of the acute and multifaceted protection crisis, responses from national authorities and international actors should revolve around three sets of initiatives:

➤ Enhancing protection and situational analysis to drive intervention and improve impact

Access to gang-controlled areas is one of the major challenges faced by national and international actors to respond to the humanitarian and protection needs of the most vulnerable groups. The evolving security dynamics between and among gangs, their territorial gains and losses, as well as the short-lived gangs' leaderships require humanitarian actors to constantly adapt their engagement with gangs, sometimes on a weekly basis. In addition to the challenge of accessing certain areas, there is a conspicuous data deficit on the humanitarian and protection situation of vulnerable groups in marginalised areas of Port-au-Prince.

- An information cell and data collection platform should be created to allow the UN system to share knowledge and resources on protection incidents with humanitarian actors.
- A protection monitoring mechanism should be established to reinforce the capacities of local stakeholders active in gang-controlled areas to collect protection information against pivotal indicators to plan and carry out delivery of assistance and services to vulnerable groups.

➤ Boosting support to rule of law institutions

Rule of law institutions, in particular the Haitian National Police and the judiciary, play a critical role to curtail armed violence induced by gang elements. However, over the past few years, these institutions have shown their inability to do so, despite the implementation of several multilateral and bilateral initiatives. Increased advisory, technical and operational support should be provided to the HNP, including the Inspection Générale, to carry out effective police operations in gang-controlled areas to protect citizens while respecting human rights standards and guaranteeing police accountability.

- On the basis of the International Commission against Impunity model, such in Guatemala, assistance should be provided to Haitian justice institutions to investigate and prosecute emblematic massacres, in particular those involving gangs in Grand Ravine (2017), La Saline (2018) and Bel-Air (2019).
 - With the support of regional countries, law enforcement authorities should be supported to tackle the smuggling and trafficking of weapons into the country, as one of the main enablers of violence, including sexual violence.
- #### *➤ Developing a comprehensive protection response program which bridges humanitarian and development initiatives*



Protection responses to the impact and consequences of armed violence carried out by gangs must go beyond humanitarian intervention. Humanitarian action is only one part of a much broader holistic response which involves state authorities, the private sector and development partners. The plight and vulnerability of victims of armed violence require a more coordinated and integrated approach based on a protection perspective.

- Analysis provided by the protection monitoring mechanism should be used to guide humanitarian and development interventions in gang-controlled areas.
- The coordination and integration of protection programs carried out by national and international actors should be reinforced at the planning and implementation stages according to collective outcomes.

For sexual violence

- Reinforce the coordination and integration of humanitarian interventions in particular for survivors of sexual violence involving gang elements, through the Spotlight Initiative, while emphasizing the need for a seamless and inter-disciplinary intervention chain.

For child abuse and exploitation

- Strengthen the availability and accessibility to social services for children and the youth in dysfunctional sub-urban areas. Particular emphasis should be given to the improvement of access to education, health and nutrition services.