



Haiti under Gang Control: The Uprising of Sexual Violence

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The Representative of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is in charge of co-chairing the protection sector alongside the “Office du Protecteur du Citoyen” in Haiti. Concerned about serious allegations of human rights violations and abuses, OHCHR under the supervision of the Director, Mr. Arnaud Royer, undertook an in-depth protection assessment mission in November 2021.

The objective was to understand the global environment and conditions of people living in areas controlled by the gangs including the protection risks that they are facing, their access to basic services and the capacity of humanitarian organisations to assist them. The team met with over 50 partners of civil society, government representatives, agencies, international non-governmental organisations, local organisations and services providers.

In an interview with the Global Protection Cluster (GPC), Mr. Royer, who has a wide experience working in conflict situations, shares his concerns about the deterioration of the protection situation in gang-controlled areas and its impact on individuals and communities – outlining three concrete actions that we can collectively take to avoid the situation quickly escalating.



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Interview with Arnaud Royer, Director, Representative of the **High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Haiti**

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Front page picture "K-Lasaline", inspired by the painting Guernica by Pablo Picasso, was created by the Haitian painter, Eddy Pierre. This was produced by the Human Rights Office in Haiti (BDHH), as part of an original plea in connection with the defense of the victims of the La Saline massacre of November 13 and 14, 2018, where at least 26 people were executed and numerous human rights violations were committed, including at least two gang rapes, during clashes between rival gangs in the neighborhood of the same name.

What is happening in Haiti?

Arnaud Royer: Haiti, and particularly Port-au-Prince, has suffered from gang related criminal activities since decades. However, this situation has worsened in recent months due to the political vacuum after the assassination of the president. In 2021, the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince experienced a high level and rapid expansion of gang-related violence never recorded before. According to UN humanitarian actors, around 1 million people are under the control or influence of gangs in the metropolitan of Port-au-Prince – this figure could be up to 3,5 million according to local analysts.

The communities living in areas controlled by the gangs are suffering from direct physical and mental harm as well as not being able to meet their basic needs. They have no choice but accept this violent environment and live under the yoke of the gangs.

The violence is now out of control and unmet by the police – sole provider of security in the country – due to concerning lack of capacity and equipment. The judicial system is also suffering from paralysis. The communities have become invisible to the eyes of many. In the last couple of months, we have recorded a higher number of people killed, injured and being kidnapped.

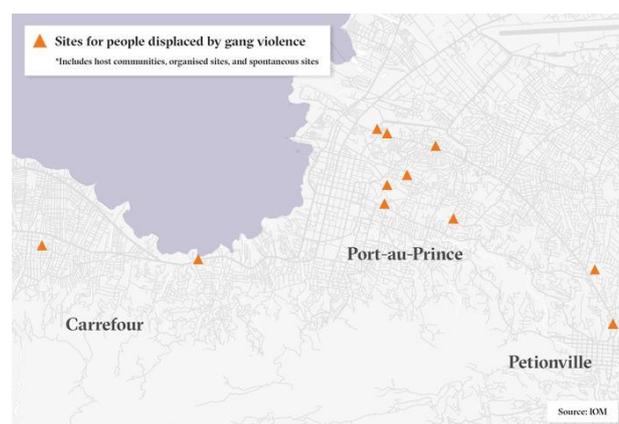
Haiti is now a humanitarian crisis induced by armed violence. It is not solely the humanitarian crisis linked to natural disaster that we used to know of. It is the level of violence that we have documented recently, especially sexual violence, that is my main concern.

Why is it concerning?

Arnaud Royer: As I said, armed violence has been recurrent in Haiti – it has been the feature of the political and security landscape in the country for the past 25 years. What is concerning today is the expansion of gang violence and insecurity, their increase of control of territory, and their overtaking of the economy and power vacuum in total impunity.

As a result of this violence, thousands of children have dropped out of school and many medical facilities have been forced to close or reduce their services and capacities.

It is also the way gangs integrate the social fabrics and take control of basic services – like food delivery and access to utility services – that is of grave concern.



Another aspect I want to emphasize is precisely sexual violence. I have worked for many years in armed conflict situations, and I am well aware that sexual violence is very often underreported. Here what shocked me is that sexual violence linked to armed violence is not underreported but totally invisible.

The assessment that we conducted established that rape was used as a weapon to humiliate, terrorize and reinforce the control of gang members over local populations. In some areas, the feeling of impunity is so pervasive that rapes have been perpetrated in broad daylight.

We lack comprehensive data on sexual violence induced by gang violence. But we have enough to raise the concern. Women, girls and boys are directly exposed to higher risks of sexual and gender-based violence because of gang violence. According to our assessment, since June, on average there are at least 75 victims per month, including children as young as 2 years old. Even if we were able to assess only a glimpse of what is happening, the snapshot is one of a very disturbing situation. In addition, only a handful of medical facilities are able to provide specific care for trauma and sexual and gender-based violence.

The level of fear and the atmosphere of terror that some victims described to me is astounding. Ten years ago, I was working in those areas of Port-au-Prince and this aspect did not exist. The humanitarian community is already facing challenges in accessing these communities in need and the situation can only worsen. If nothing is done, we will be witnessing a rapidly deteriorating situation spiralling out of control and affecting a higher number of people.

What can we do about it?

Arnaud Royer: Here are three things that we believe can be done to respond to conflict dynamics and humanitarian needs in Haiti and ensure proper attention is given to the protection crisis.

1- Raise the profile of Haiti

First, we need to raise the profile of Haiti. And this is one of armed violence. We need to convey the message that what is happening here is very disturbing.

People live in fear of being attacked, killed, kidnapped or raped and we have a responsibility to give them back their voices. As a protection community, we need to do everything we can to collect information and carry out joint analysis on the situation.

2- Reorient the international posture

Second, we need to bring back the focus on the situation in Haiti so not only the international community pays attention to Haitians but also re-orient its posture regarding the country.

This is particularly important right now, as we enter into a bigger discussion at the Security Council about the future of the United Nations in Haiti. Member States have a responsibility to turn away from geopolitical considerations and provide the much-needed support to the people of Haiti. There is a need to assess if the current mandate of the UN Mission, is equipped to address the security problem at stake and to look into options to raise the capacity of national police forces, such as UN

police operations or bilateral engagements. My main message is a call for something more, and this has to include a security component to address the issues of gang violence in Haiti.

The international community also needs to support the humanitarian community to instate a humanitarian response that will address the current needs and ensure that the programming be adequately funded.

3- Bring security to the city so people are safe

Finally, the deterioration of the protection situation is a symptom of a bigger problem, which relates to arms control. It is crucial that alongside the response to protection concerns, stakeholders work with the government to bring security to the city, particularly in gang-controlled areas.

Haiti is in a situation of chronic violence in which weapons flow and armed smuggling are widespread and hugely linked to the uprising of sexual violence. And no one seems willing to address the issue. This is the elephant in the room. We can't address the root causes of the conflict, tackle poverty, economic turmoil, and social injustice if people are unsafe and at high risk of violence, exploitation and abuse. There is no time to waste. We need to freeze the expansion of gang violence. I doubt victims in Haiti have the luxury to wait.