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Crime, Politics and Violence in Post-Earthquake Haiti

Summary

- Crime and violence are on the rise in Port-au-Prince due to prisoner escapes during the earthquake. Youth gangs and other armed groups are regaining strength in the most vulnerable neighborhoods and spreading to other areas of the city. In the tent camps around Port-au-Prince, displaced people—especially women—remain vulnerable to crime. These factors have contributed to an increasing sense of insecurity.
- As political tensions rise in the run-up to elections, armed groups, criminal enterprises and vulnerable youth could once again be mobilized by political forces to fuel violence or disrupt the political process.
- Gangs and their involvement in criminal and political violence are deeply rooted in Haitian politics, and fueled by widespread poverty, inadequate police presence, government weakness, and social and economic inequities. Prior to the earthquake, criminal violence had begun to decline due to a combination of political reconciliation, law enforcement operations and investment in marginalized neighborhoods.
- These fragile gains have been reversed since the earthquake and public confidence in the police has been shaken. Directing resources toward mitigating violence while addressing the underlying sources of crime and violence should remain a priority in post-earthquake reconstruction.

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Introduction

Since the earthquake on January 12, 2010, worldwide attention has focused on rebuilding Haiti's physical infrastructure and governance capacity. This already monumental task is complicated by the risk that Haiti's prior cycles of crime, violence or instability may re-emerge to disrupt the reconstruction process. Although violent crime has decreased since its height in 2005, the earthquake has created new vulnerabilities and fueled an increase in crime. If not properly managed, these risks could threaten the upcoming elections and reconstruction process.

Crime and Violence Are on the Increase since the Earthquake

Since the devastating earthquake in January, criminal activity has increased in parts of Port-au-Prince, fueling fears of renewed instability and violence throughout the city. The rise in crime is driven largely by the escape of thousands of prisoners from the National Penitentiary in Port-au-Prince following the earthquake. According to the Haitian National Police (HNP), 5,136 prisoners

escaped, including around 700 violent gang members. Some of these escapees have accessed hidden caches of weapons. As of mid-July, only 627 had been recaptured, including roughly 100 gang members, although more were being rounded up daily.

This massive escape has set off a new wave of crime, especially in the most vulnerable areas. Many gang members have sought to return to their former neighborhoods, setting off violent turf battles and increased street crime. A new armed group known as the *Armee Federale* has brought together the escaped prisoners from several neighborhoods. They hide out in the hills of the Mar-tissant section of Port-au-Prince and conduct increasingly organized criminal activities throughout the city. Cases of kidnapping and assault increased during the first half of 2010 and crime has been reported in the previously quiet suburbs above Port-au-Prince.

This increase in crime has been compounded by damage to an already weak HNP and justice system. Faced with 79 deaths and hundreds of injuries among their ranks, police officers were initially absorbed with the post-earthquake clean up, leading to an immediate reduction in the effective force by around half. The numbers have since risen to the pre-earthquake level of roughly 9,000, yet many HNP continue to operate out of tents next to destroyed stations, while over 65 percent of vehicles and much of their equipment remains damaged or destroyed. The U.N. mission (MINUSTAH) also sustained significant damage that temporarily affected its capacity until its ranks were replenished.

The proliferation of displaced people in tent camps around the city has created an additional burden for the security forces and an opportunity for criminals. Humanitarian agencies have succeeded in averting widespread epidemics and famine among the estimated 1.9 million people displaced by the earthquake, by distributing tents, food, water and medical care. Yet, the tent camps set up in hundreds of places around the city are vulnerable not only to disease and the elements, but also to violence. The U.N. has identified numerous cases of thefts, rapes and domestic violence within camps and camp residents continue to report a high level of insecurity. Residents also report that escaped prisoners have been using the camps as safe havens, and the police hesitate to enter the camps in pursuit of criminals for fear of civilian casualties. Many camps have set up "security committees," but these groups lack training or clear channels of communication with either camp residents or the police.

Political Conflict during Elections Could Fuel Further Violence

With elections approaching, increased gang activity may be linked to political struggles. Although reduced political tensions in the early days of the Préal government weakened the link between crime and politics, political conflict is now on the rise. The government is planning to hold presidential and parliamentary elections in November 2010 to meet the constitutional timeframe for the new government to take office. Opposition leaders, however, have accused the government of stacking the elections against them. Several parties are calling for mass mobilization in an effort to force Préal to step down and change the composition of the Provisional Election Commission. Attendance at demonstrations has been limited so far, but even minor incidents of violence could easily disrupt the elections process. In this climate, unemployed youth and reinvigorated gangs seeking to re-establish their turf may be a tempting target for political leaders seeking to mobilize demonstrators, disrupt the elections or undermine the government after the elections.

Port-au-Prince Gangs Arose from Divisive Politics and Weak Governance

The link between neighborhood youth groups, armed gangs and political conflict is rooted in Haiti's winner-take-all politics, in which the use of informal armed groups has been a long-favored

political strategy, fueled by widespread poverty, weak government services and deep social and economic inequities. Youth gangs are based in the poorest and most marginalized urban neighborhoods in Port-au-Prince and in other urban areas around the country. The growing youth population in these areas was vulnerable to the tumultuous social and political forces around them. In the early 1990s, these neighborhoods became politically active, largely in support of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who promised to focus on their plight after decades of neglect. Both Aristide and his political rivals sought to build upon this support, distributing weapons to groups of youth and mobilizing them to protect their political and economic interests. These groups assumed responsibility for security in their neighborhoods, often extorting market sellers and other businesses in exchange for protection, and sometimes becoming involved in drug smuggling and other illicit activities.

Violent turf battles intensified after Aristide's departure as armed groups competed for control of neighborhoods and money-making opportunities. In the run-up to the 2006 elections, political parties and private sector actors exploited these divisions, distributing cash and weapons to armed groups in exchange for their assistance in mobilizing people to demonstrate and vote for them, to disrupt the elections, or to protect their businesses. Some groups linked up with organized criminal enterprises -- involving kidnapping, arms trading and drug smuggling—to bring in revenue and to raise their profile politically in bids for external support. Other groups remained localized, driven by violent rivalries specific to each neighborhood. As kidnapping and murders spread throughout Port-au-Prince, nowhere did people suffer more than within the underprivileged neighborhoods where the armed groups were based. Children were recruited to carry weapons and drugs, women were raped and kidnapped as sex slaves, and innocent civilians were caught in the crossfire of gang wars and turf battles.

Fragile Steps toward Stability before the Earthquake

The level of crime declined significantly after 2006 due to an evolving political context, robust operations by MINUSTAH and the HNP, and increased investment in marginalized neighborhoods. After his election in 2006, President Rene Prével calmed tensions by reaching out to many of the country's political factions and bringing them into his coalition, thereby reducing incentives for political violence. He established relationships with gang leaders, reportedly promising them jobs and resources in exchange for ending their criminal activities. In 2007, the failure of these negotiations amidst continuing crime led Prével to support a series of combined MINUSTAH and HNP operations in Cite Soleil that captured or forced into exile many of the top gang leaders.

At the same time, donor-funded programs enhanced the availability of services and infrastructure in these neighborhoods and improved relationships between the population and local authorities. For example, the U.S.-sponsored Haiti Stabilization Initiative (HSI) combined short-term jobs, infrastructure, and support to the HNP to create a more conducive atmosphere for development projects and private-sector investment. Other projects supported dialogue and community-building to reduce tensions across rival neighborhoods.

The security situation throughout Port-au-Prince improved. With their leadership disrupted, armed groups decreased in size and could no longer carry out organized operations like kidnapping. Political tensions became less salient, and turf battles decreased in intensity. The HNP expanded their presence in some neighborhoods and public confidence in them improved as efforts at professionalizing the HNP began to take root. Improvements in infrastructure—most notably two new police stations and an expanded main road through Cite Soleil—contributed to improved relationships among residents and government authorities.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief was prepared by Louis-Alexandre Berg, a Jennings-Randolph Peace scholar at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) and a rule of law adviser at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). It is based on research conducted by the author in Haiti in July 2010, aimed at assessing vulnerabilities to conflict and instability in the post-earthquake period.

The views expressed by the author are entirely his own and do not reflect those of USAID or USIP, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

Nonetheless, armed groups continued to operate and prey on the people within their communities, primarily through petty, neighborhood-level crimes. While some neighborhoods benefited from donor projects, others were left out, fueling continued tensions. In a mere three years, donor attention to these areas did not translate into sufficient new jobs, government services, or sense of community, while the sense of exclusion among residents of these neighborhoods remained high.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, these fragile improvements were set back as escaped prisoners returned to their neighborhoods, law enforcement capabilities weakened, and the intensive focus on marginalized areas waned, allowing violent crime to re-emerge. The HNP and MINUSTAH have stepped up their presence in camps and staged high profile operations in search of escaped prisoners. As the justice system struggles to function after the destruction to buildings, files and personnel, these large-scale operations risk raising the already high number of pre-trial detainees. Meanwhile, camp residents continue to report that they rarely see the overstretched and under-resourced HNP, residents of slum areas report decreased confidence in the police, and security across the city has declined.

Conclusion: Community Development, Services, Jobs and Law Enforcement

The increase in insecurity since the earthquake underscores Haiti's continued vulnerability to violent crime and political instability. Overcrowded urban areas plagued by high poverty and unemployment combined with weak government institutions will continue to serve as breeding grounds for violent crime and armed groups for years to come. As political conflict escalates, these groups can be manipulated by political or economic interests to fuel broader instability.

Efforts that had begun to demonstrate progress in addressing these challenges prior to the earthquake should be continued and expanded. The combination of improved infrastructure, government services in marginalized areas inside and outside of Port-au-Prince, jobs and education for at-risk youth, and robust law enforcement can reduce the propensity toward violence in these areas, if they are sustained for sufficient time and linked to longer-term development. Critical to these efforts is a focus on improving social ties within and across communities to reduce tension, and building local capacity for managing conflicts. Improvements to the management and leadership of the HNP, implementing stalled reforms in the judiciary, strengthening local government, and fostering dialogue and reconciliation among political parties are further necessary to avoid recurrent crime and political conflict. As they turn their attention from immediate humanitarian aid toward reconstruction, the Haitian government and international community should direct resources toward mitigating conflict in the short-term while continuing to address the underlying drivers of crime and violence in Haiti.



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