

Guns, gangs and foreign meddling: how life in Haiti went from bad to worse

Corrupt elites and badly managed aid have ensured life for Haitians remains mired in violence and poverty. President Moïse's assassination marks an escalating catastrophe



Police stand before a mural of Haiti's President Jovenel Moïse, who was assassinated last week, days after another 15 Haitians were gunned down.

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The Haitian political activist Marie Antoinette Duclair appears to have been unaware that two men on a motorbike were following her car through the badly lit streets of Port-au-Prince.

Her passenger on the night of 29 June was a journalist, Diego Charles. They had been attending a meeting, and she was now, at 11 o'clock at night, dropping him at his home in the Christ-Roi area of Haiti's capital.

As Charles walked to his door the gunmen on the motorbike opened fire, killing him first before murdering Duclair as she sat in her car.



Antoinette Duclair, who was murdered last month in Haiti's capital, denouncing international support for President Jovenel Moïse at a demonstration in Port-au-Prince in February.

In all, 15 Haitians died in targeted killings that night, including Charles and Duclair. It was not a story that made many international headlines. At least not for very long.

Just over a week later another assassination drowned out interest in that bloody night of violence: that of Haiti's president, Jovenel Moïse, who was gunned down in his home in the hills above Port-au-Prince by mercenaries in an apparent coup attempt.

If there is a link between the two events it is that they are both brutally representative of the situation in Haiti, the western hemisphere's most impoverished nation, a country that since 2018 has been convulsed by protests and violence, where guns – and those prepared to use them – are the currency in an escalating crisis.

A snapshot of that crisis was illustrated in December 2019 by an encounter the Guardian had with Wandy Drelien, a Haitian man who was manning a protesters' barricade near the capital's airport, a pistol bulging in his waistband under his shirt.

In those days, a few weeks before the advent of the global coronavirus pandemic, Haiti's long-running political crisis had brought demonstrations and violence to the streets, even if few then had any sense where it would lead.

"We're fighting against a system where we can't eat and we don't get paid. That's why we've taken to the streets," Drelien explained then. "The president [Moïse] isn't working for us. He's no friend of the people – only of the bourgeoisie and businessmen, while we live in poverty."



People carry a coffin to a funeral organised by the opposition in Port-au-Prince in October 2019 after weeks of anti-corruption protests demanding Moïse's resignation.

Now Moïse is dead, assassinated in his private residence in the Pelerin 5 district of Pétion-Ville, the wealthy enclave where Haiti's political and business elite live in the hills above the capital. And Haiti's long-running crisis has reached full throttle.

It has become routine to see one of the world's most corrupt and ill-governed states lurch from catastrophe to catastrophe, amid coups, failed governments and natural disasters. But this current crisis brings a particular question to the fore – how, despite being the recipient of \$13bn (£9.5bn) in international aid since the devastating 2010 earthquake that killed an estimated 220,000 people, has the situation for Haitians, by most indicators, continued to worsen?

The very modest gains in poverty reduction in Haiti, according to the World Bank, has gone into reverse, with 60% of the country living in poverty and the richest 20% of the population holding more than 64% of its income.

Haiti is unusual among failed and fragile nations. It is not only an "aid state", hugely dependent on external development assistance and remittances from Haitians living abroad, but one where aid and foreign intervention, far from helping, has helped undermine an almost nonexistent administration.

Few who have not visited Haiti can fully comprehend the absence of services and institutions, planning or state direction.



Shacks in the Fort National district of Port-au-Prince. Nearly two-thirds of Haiti's population lives in poverty.

Even as the current crisis was beginning, in an interview three years ago, Joël Boutroue, then deputy special representative for the UN stabilisation mission in Haiti, was blunt. “Haiti would be better off without aid,” he said. “Or at least, without the bad kind of aid that allows the administration and the elites to continue without changing.

“It would be better to create the conditions in which change could happen,” he added. “If we get involved, we should do so in an intelligent way, even if that is less visible in terms of the value it brings.”

And while it is only a part of the picture, it is a significant one. The world’s first black republic and the first country to be founded by former slaves, Haiti declared independence from France in 1804. The new nation faced blockades, isolation and protracted interference over two centuries from white-majority powers, including France, which imposed a century of impoverishing reparations for the loss of its slaves, only paid off in 1947, in exchange for recognition.

While some of the toxic consequences of intervention have been obvious, others have been more subtle. As US historian Robert Taber wrote in the Washington Post last week, some have been well documented, “including the Clinton administration cratering the Haitian rice market in the mid-1990s and a UN peacekeeping force reintroducing cholera in the mid-2000s.”

“The notion of Haiti as an aid state is a corrective to the idea of failed state,” says Jake Johnston, a researcher at the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, who coined the term and returned from Haiti a few days before Moïse’s

assassination. “It’s not just about aid itself but about foreign interference and intervention.



US army paratroopers outside Haiti’s National Palace after the 2010 earthquake. More than \$13bn in aid flowed into the country after the natural disaster but there has been little development to show for it.

“And when you talk about the ‘aid state’, it is a country [in which] current institutions have been shaped more by outside actors than internal ones. That has manifested itself in different ways, not least by the fact that since the years of the [Baby Doc] Duvalier dictatorship (which ended in 1986), aid has bypassed government, which has had a deeply corrosive effect.

“Rather than strengthening institutions, the mechanisms by which it has been delivered inherently undermine those same institutions, especially in more recent decades, which has seen the outsourcing of the state,” said Johnston.

“Economic policies have been imposed by multilateral banks, like the IMF, which has seen agricultural subsidies slashed. The education and health systems have been turned over to private actors like NGOs. All of which has created a separation between the people and a government that is not governing.”

If that has hollowed out Haiti’s institutions, foreign interventions including aid policy have had, in Johnston’s telling, a more insidious effect.

“Aid to Haiti has been used for political purposes going back years. It is transactional. It has gone up under certain leaders and it has gone down when someone isn’t liked, or it goes to an organisation that shares the interest of the donor country,” he said.



Officials and reporters beside broken furniture in Haiti's parliament after it was vandalised by opposition MPs in 2019.

This profound disconnect between a barely governing ruling class, drawn from a wealthy elite, and the barely governed, leaves little incentive for those notionally in charge to combat Haiti's many problems – from the violent criminality represented by its gangs to its lack of services, rampant poverty and devastating environmental despoliation.

In a Haiti where politicians and criminals alike enjoy impunity, politics historically has relied on the armed gangs – operating like paramilitaries – rather than electoral accountability to remain in office, from Papa Doc Duvalier's Tontons Macoutes to the *Chimères* [or ghosts] of the Jean-Bertrand Aristide era, and the gangs used by both sides under Jovenel Moïse.

Jonathan M Katz, an American journalist who reported on the 2010 earthquake analysed how \$3.5bn of foreign aid failed to improve Haiti in his book *The Big Truck That Went By: How the World Came to Save Haiti and Left Behind a Disaster*.

“The thing is that I don't think a lot people realise how aid has been used intentionally to weaken the Haitian state. There's a long, if little-known, paper trail, going back to the end of the Duvalier dictatorship, particularly involving the US,” he said.

“There are documents that very specifically talk about using private, voluntary organisations – now known as NGOs – to funnel money away from the Haitian government to recreate its functions elsewhere.

“It happened again explicitly during the period of the Aristide government [the leftwing president who fell victim to a coup and was reinstated by a US military intervention] and there are public documents from USAid and other government agencies saying we were withholding money and giving it to private organisations to weaken the policies of Aristide.”



Internally displaced Haitians living at a sports centre in Port-au-Prince last month after fleeing violence between two gangs fighting for control of the neighbourhoods of Martissant and Fontamara.

The consequence, as critics have pointed out in recent years, has been to deepen the long-running democratic crisis in Haiti, with electoral participation plummeting since Aristide became Haiti’s first democratically elected leader in the 1990s to the first post-quake elections, which saw less than 25% of the population vote.

Recent governments have been largely divorced from Haitians’ lives of poverty, nominated from within the same tight circle of politically connected oligarchs with the blessing of foreign powers, not least Washington, which have pursued short-term stability over long-term sustainability.

All of which came to a head in the PetroCaribe scandal that began during the presidency of Michel Martelly and in which Moïse became embroiled when he succeeded Martelly.

The \$3.2bn PetroCaribe scheme – from which about \$2bn is alleged to have been stolen – was an alternative model to improve the Haitian situation, in which funds freed up by a deferred payment credit scheme for Venezuelan energy were then to be dispensed by Haiti’s government for large-scale development projects.

Where the PetroCaribe scandal was different – if not in the corruption – was the ability of ordinary Haitians and Haitian institutions to ask what had happened to the missing billions.

“The thing about PetroCaribe,” says Katz, “was that it was supposed to be the thing that the post-earthquake reconstruction was not. Venezuela in its munificence was going free up all this money for Haiti to spend on itself.

“If there had been a better leader, more accountable to the people, rather than Martelly, it might have done some good.”



The Pétion-Ville market in Port-au-Prince this week, days after President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated.

Jean Marc Brissau, a young Haitian who studied as lawyer in Port-au-Prince before leaving for the US, identifies another critical issue that has contributed to Haiti's problems: the exodus of the country's well-educated people, who have been put off becoming involved in the problematic politics.

“The gangs control the country, so educated people like myself can't find a place in Haiti,” he said. “We don't feel welcome. You don't feel like you would want to be involved in politics and be labelled as corrupt or killed or kidnapped.

“So you say to yourself I can better change things from abroad. It's not the way it should be, but this is the way it is.”