

Tensions soar in Haiti's capital after police officers killed



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Protests in Haiti / Photo: File?

Port-au-Prince, January 26 (RHC)-- Angry demonstrators have roared through the streets of Haiti's capital, blocking roads and shooting guns into the air to protest a slew of killings of police officers by Haitian gangs over the last week.

Haitian news outlet Le Nouvelliste reported that angry scenes erupted in several neighbourhoods of Port-au-Prince on Thursday, and barricades of burning tyres were erected in the centre of the city.

Public transportation was interrupted and several schools were forced to close, it said. “Armed demonstrators posing as police officers tried to enter the courtyard of the prime minister’s official residence before heading to the airport road,” Le Nouvelliste reported.

Gang violence has been on the rise across Port-au-Prince in recent months, after the July 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moise worsened widespread political instability and created a power vacuum. The United Nations said in November that armed gangs controlled approximately 60 percent of the capital, where they were carrying out a campaign of murder, kidnappings and sexual violence in an effort to expand their influence and “terrorise” residents.

Gangs have killed at least 10 police officers in the past week, while another is missing and one more has suffered severe bullet wounds, according to the Haitian National Police (HNP).

A video obtained by The Associated Press news agency and acknowledged by police on Thursday – likely recorded by gangs – showed the naked and bloodied bodies of six officers stretched out on the dirt, their guns laying on their chests. The gang who killed them, known as Gan Grif, still has the bodies, police said.

The deaths enraged members of Fantom 509, an armed group of current and former police officers that has violently demanded better conditions for officers. Dozens of these men wove through Port-au-Prince on Thursday, many wearing hoods along with police uniforms, flak jackets, and rifles and automatic weapons.

They demanded tougher crackdowns on the gangs, and called for the end to the current government of Haiti’s acting Prime Minister Ariel Henry, who took up the post just weeks after Moise’s 2021 killing and faces a crisis of legitimacy. “If they are killing police officers, me as a citizen, what should I do?” one protester in a mask screamed into an Associated Press camera. “The police are second only to God and we’re going to stand behind them.”

During an earlier uptick of gang violence in October, Henry had appealed for an international armed force to be deployed to Haiti to restore order and help end a since-lifted gang blockade on the main fuel terminal in Port-au-Prince.

The prime minister’s call has been backed by the UN, as well as the United States, but set off new protests, with many Haitians, including civil society leaders, rejecting the prospect of foreign intervention.

Since then, Washington-led efforts to mount “a non-UN mission led by a partner country” to Haiti have stalled, as President Joe Biden’s administration so far has failed to get another nation to agree to lead such a force.

In the meantime, the U.S. and its allies, including Canada, have issued a series of sweeping sanctions against Haitian officials over their alleged support for gangs and other activities contributing to instability in the Caribbean nation.

But insecurity continues across Haiti, as civil rights groups say a lack of functioning, government institutions and widespread corruption has impeded efforts to stem gang violence. In addition to the bodies displayed by the gang this week, a number of Haitian police officers were killed last week in a firefight with gangs in a neighbourhood that was once considered relatively safe.

The Haitian National Police expressed condolences to the slain officers’ families and colleagues. The force added that it is “calling for peace and invites police officers to come together to bring forward an institutional response to the different criminal organisations that terrorise the Haitian people”.

The U.S. embassy in Haiti also offered its condolences to the victims' loved ones on Thursday, while calling for "calm to safeguard the population and allow for a peaceful mourning period." "We stand with the security forces as they combat armed gangs to restore security to the Haitian people," the embassy wrote on Twitter.

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