Tuesday, March 19, 2024 / How gangs took over Haiti

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

NOEL: Maybe you’ve seen the news that Haiti is experiencing a new round of violence and maybe you feel like you’ve seen this before.

NOEL: Haiti is generally unstable. But now is a particularly chaotic time,

because of something called “vive en somme” or “live together” - which sounds nice / but is in fact a formal alliance of two powerful criminal gangs.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZMDO0v4dtqs)*> BBC Will Grant: One of Haiti’s main gangs has released a slickly-produced video, currently circulating online. It shows a well-armed militia, a group prepared to take on the Haitian state and any international force which might be deployed here.*

*<CLIP> Louis-Henry Mars I mean, they kill, they maim, they rape, they burn, they loot. That's their business. They kidnap. That's their business.*

NOEL: Together they’ve seized the capital, blocked the Prime Minister from returning, looted homes, killed civilians, and delivered a frightening message: we’re in charge

That’s coming up on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

NOEL: It’s *Today, Explained*. I’m Noel King, I’m back with Joe Daniels who covers Haiti for the Financial Times. Now, Haiti has dealt with generations of instability and so I asked Joe what makes this current eruption different.

JOE DANIELS: Well, the main thing that has happened is the gangs that spent much of the last few years fighting against each other have now united to fight against the state.

SCORING IN—INFINITE WHACK A MOLE

JOE: So the current escalation in violence in Haiti can be traced back to the July 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moise.

*<CLIP> GOOD MORNING AMERICA: Local media reported that the assailants stormed into the president's bedroom, shooting him 12 times. His wife shot three times.*

JOE DANIELS: He is murdered in his mansion in an upscale suburb of port au Prince, Petit, on view in the middle of the night by Colombian mercenaries.

*<CLIP> GOOD MORNING AMERICA: More than a dozen of the suspects are former members of the Colombian Army. Among the suspects, two Americans.*

JOE DANIELS: Beyond that, the circumstances largely remain shrouded in mystery. There are dual investigations taking place. One in Haiti and one in Florida. They're ongoing. Since that assassination, we've seen the security situation in Haiti, especially in Port au Prince. The capital deteriorates, amid a kind of political parallel crisis. And that is due to the muddled succession or lack of succession plan put in place following Moise's assassination. So Moise is assassinated in July 2021. His prime minister at the time, Claude Joseph, was the de facto leader of the country for about 13 days. In that time, Ariel Henry emerged victorious in a sort of power struggle to succeed Moise in a kind of larger, longer term.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA:: The 71 year old neurosurgeon is calling for unity, but he's facing a long list of social and political issues. HENRY THROUGH INTERPRETER: We will create a secure, reliable and stable environment to facilitate political activities throughout the Country*

JOE DANIELS: Ariel Henry had the key backing of what at the time was called the Core Group, an international coalition led by the US, France and Canada. So Henry emerges victorious in that power struggle. He is acting Prime minister. He draws some legitimacy from the fact that Moise, before his assassination, had named Henry as his next prime minister, though hadn't actually kind of made that official. But the Haitian public never recognized Henry.

*<CLIP> HAITIAN MAN : [SPEAKING THROUGH INTERPRETER] That this government won't think for the people. They're unpopular. They're only thinking for the elite again.*

JOE DANIELS: To them, he was anointed by, you know, a coalition outside of Haiti. They saw it as a kind of puppets of the US and, various moments in the last 32 months, Haitians have taken en masse to the streets to protest on ring.

*<CLIP> FRANCE 24 Barricades of burning tires in the streets of port au Prince as protesters took to the streets for the second day in a row. They're calling for Prime Minister Ariel Henry to resign, accusing him of failing to tackle a devastating surge in gang violence.*

JOE DANIELS: They called for his resignation a number of times, and gangs have increasingly also called for it, claiming to represent the people, the Haitian people out there in the streets.

SCORING OUT

JOE DANIELS: All of this is happening since Moise's death in 2021, amid a wider deterioration of the security situation in parts of Prince. As gangs thrive in the absence of a really a Haitian state. Well, of course, terrorizing the people, extorting Haitians, kidnaping Haitians rich and poor. Like for ransoms that you hear ranging from, you know, 50 bucks to a million. And beyond the gangs I see this kind of having thrived in part due to, Henry's kind of indifference to the situation. Do it. Not doing enough to clamp down on them.

*<CLIP> HAITIAN MAN DURING PROTEST: Prime Minister Ariel Henry is the head of the government. He has done absolutely nothing for the population. And security is everywhere. The roads are destroyed. No one can go on with their daily life.*

JOE DANIELS: And also, there are some accusations that, the gangs have, connections with Haitian political elites, including Ariel Henry, including Jovenel Moise.

NOEL KING: So you're describing a lot of instability. But up until recently, the gangs were competing with each other. And then the the turn here is that the gangs have united. Tell us what their motive is and and what emerged from from them uniting.

JOE DANIELS: The honest answer is we don't know exactly why they united, but it is a huge surprise that it took them so long.

NOEL: Hmm.

JOE: The consequences are plain to see.

<CLIP> DW NEWS: Armed Gangs demanding the Prime Minister's resignation have attacked two prisons, allowing thousands of inmates to escape, leaving dozens dead and wounded.

JOE DANIELS: They managed to, through coordinated attacks, shut down the country.

*<CLIP> CBS NEWS: The international airport has stopped operating. No flights in or out.*

JOE DANIELS: The timing for all of this happening right now, for the gangs coming together right now, is also quite informative of the wider situation. Ariel Henry had left the country. He left the country initially to go to Guyana, which is the seat of Caricom, the Caribbean Community, a trade bloc of Caribbean countries. He went to a summit in Guyana with Caricom and then went straight from there to Kenya. In order to shore up support for an international mission to bolster Haiti's police force.

*<CLIP> REUTERS: Kenya's government first pledged 1000 officers to lead the security mission last July, but the initiative had been tied up in court challenges ever since.*

JOE DANIELS: The gangs may have seen that as a kind of opportune moment to launch their strikes. Strikes which, been described, as a preemptive strike on any possible mission that could arrive to try and kind of quell the violence in Haiti.

NOEL KING: Who are the gang leaders?

JOE DANIELS: Well, the most prominent gang leader is Jimmy Cherizier.

SCORING IN—UPTOWN SCUFFLE

*<CLIP> SKY NEWS: Once a Haitian police officer, he is now the leader of a powerful confederation of gangs called G9, which controls much of port au Prince and its suburbs.*

JOE DANIELS: Better known by the alias barbecue or barbecue. He claims that that nickname comes from his mother's roadside chicken restaurant.

NOEL: Hm!

JOE DANIELS: Analysts say it could well be due to his tendency for burning victims alive.

NOEL: Oh.

JOE: Yes. He's a gruesome figure. He's very media savvy, very charismatic. Paints himself as a revolutionary. Has a kind of. Almost a social media operation. He gives kind of press conferences from the slums of Port-au-Prince, surrounded by by his his footmen in balaclavas, holding assault rifles.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA: Cherizier says he wants revolution. [gunshots] CHERIZIER: Now our fight will enter another phase to overthrow the whole system. The system that has 5% of people who control 95% of the country's wealth.*

SCORING OUT

NOEL KING: Can the Haitian government, such as it is, can it do anything?

JOE DANIELS: That's not an easy question to answer. It's not even that easy right now to kind of have a clearer idea of what the Haitian government is. Ariel Henry, the acting prime minister, is out of the country

*<CLIP> CBS NEWS: Ariel Henry says that he will step down once a transitional presidential council is created. He has been stranded in Puerto Rico since armed gangs unleashed a wave of deadly violence.*

JOE DANIELS: He appears unwilling or unable to return. His life would certainly be in danger if he does manage to return in his stead. A his finance minister is now acting. Acting PM. We see a power vacuum there. That really kind of gets projected across the whole country. And the Haitian state for decades hasn't been able to really exercise sovereignty over all of its territory. And so the government, as such, is very much unable to to get the gangs under control. That is why this, you know, International mission, was initially requested by the Haitian government, by Ariel on the police force nominally is around 9000 members. In reality, that number is likely much smaller. Many Haitian police sort of migrated or just melted away into the communities. So the prospects for the Haitian government alone being able to bring the gangs to heel is wildly unlikely.

NOEL: There IS a plan for a government, right?

JOE DANIELS: Yes. That's correct. There is a plan for a government by council.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA: Now, the United States and countries in the Caribbean Caricom trading bloc are pushing for a transitional council made up of the country's political parties to appoint a new interim prime minister and lay a roadmap for elections.*

JOE DANIELS: The gangs have already said that they won't recognize the council, or any body that is kind of mediated or put there by the international community.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA: CHerizie, talking to Al Jazeera, rejected that council. CHERIZIER: we're not going to recognize the decisions that Caricom takes. I'm going to say to the traditional politicians that are sitting down with Caricom, since they went with their families abroad, we who stayed in Haiti have to make the decisions. It's not just people with guns who have damaged the country, but politicians too.*

JOE DANIELS: Within the council itself, there appears to be little consensus that it's it will be made up of members of Haiti's political class, as well as the private sector and the church. And that committee, so far hasn't kind of been able to land on the names. That it will be made up of. So the ability for it to then convene elections, against a security backdrop as bad as Haiti's really looks like a tall order at this moment.

NOEL KING: The United States has, over the years, at times, intervened in Haiti's politics. Where does the U.S. stand today on Haiti?

JOE DANIELS: Well, the US had backed Ariel Re since he assumed power in July 2021. That changed this month with these attacks back in Haiti, while while Henry was out of the country, with the US explicitly calling for Henry to expedite a transition towards elections. And, the US has backed the plan drafted by Caricom, the Caribbean Community trade bloc, for a transitional presidential Council. The UN supports that. So the US is still very much an active participant in, mediating Haiti's political crisis.

NOEL KING: The argument that the gangs are making is we don't want international observers. We don't want international police forces. We want Haiti to be left alone. Now, Haiti's been in crisis for generations. There's been a lot of international intervention in the meantime, and not a lot of it seems to have worked. Is anybody responsible, making the argument that perhaps it's. Time to let Haitians deal with Haiti.

JOE DANIELS: Well, absolutely. That argument is being made, and that argument is being made by people in Haiti at all levels. The U.S. has called for a Haitian led solution, of course, while itself having a stake, but has said that the solution needs to be led by Haiti. The question analysts have is to what extent can international actors support a Haitian led solution in a way that actually supports a Haitian led solution and doesn't become its own problem, and doesn't end up supplanting Haiti's ability to build up its own state.

SCORING IN—WAITING AROUND CORNERS>

NOEL TRACK: Joe Daniels with the Financial Times. Coming up—what gang violence in Haiti looks like from a man living just outside Haiti’s capital Port au Prince.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

LOUIS-HENRI: I'm Louis-Henry Mars, I'm a founding member and the executive director of Lakou Lapè, which is a conflict transformation and peacebuilding community and organization located in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. I live in the suburbs of Port au Prince, in a town called Pétion Ville.

NOEL: Residents of Louis’s neighborhood, him included, were nervously waiting on Friday when we talked, as the gangs moved closer and closer.

LOUIS-HENRI: Well, first of all, we experiencing a tremendous sense of insecurity. This morning, I was, thinking. I've been thinking a little bit about the fact that if my own neighborhood was attacked, like, other neighborhoods are being attacked, you know, what am I going to do?

SCORING IN—SOFTLY CYCLICAL

LOUIS-HENRI: Yesterday, the chief of police home was ransacked and looted. Yesterday, also 15 minutes away from my own home, there's, the Vitel’Homme gang who ransacked a row of houses, looted them. So they're 15 minutes away from me.

*<CLIP> CBS MIAMI: “Vitel Homme Innocent is a notorious Haitian gang leader wanted for kidnapping 16 American missionaries in 2021…”*

*<CLIP> HAITIAN WOMAN ON FRANCE24: “I fled my neighborhood when my husband was killed in front of me, but then they set fire to my house again. I’m 62 I can’t take it anymore!”*

LOUIS HENRI: If they come over to my side of, of the town, what am I going to do? Am I going to run? Am I going to resist? Am I going to try to talk to them? As a peace builder myself my personal tendency would be to try to talk to them. But I have family, I have friends, I have relatives, and they're saying, “Get out. Let them loot,” you know, “don't risk your life. They're not about talking. They're about killing and burning and maiming and raping.”

<CLIP> CNN: “This womans’ sister, shot and killed, this woman’s husband burned alive inside her home. This woman says she was raped.

NOEL: So I hear you saying, I'm in my house. And I understand that if these men get close, I could be in the same position as the people whose houses were looted and ransacked. How are you watching, hour by hour, to know where these fellas are?

LOUIS-HENRI: There's a lot of news on social networks, on WhatsApp, and, we keep tabs to the telephone. What's going on? So I know people that live in the areas that Vitel Homme is attacking right now. And, I touch base with them to see how the night was. And, from my home, I can hear the staccato of gunshots in those neighborhoods, throughout the night.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Do you have family living with you? Are you alone in the house?

LOUIS-HENRI: Actually, we have a family compound with several houses. It's, it's, historic family compound, and it's called a Lakou.. Lakou Lapè. The name Lakou Lapè is basically, talking about the a yard, a peace yard. Haiti should be, a big family yard where everybody is living in peace. That's the, the idea behind Lakou Lapè. So I have cousins that are here. We have actually moved the Lakou Lapè office, into the Lakou so that we don't have to go into the streets to, to get to work, and, and, my children have chosen to stay in Europe and in the United States, they can't even come in, and I can't even go see them because the airport is closed. we are in an open prison right now. Open, Open-like prison. Right now because you can't go out to the provinces by the road. You can't go out of the city by air. So we are totally encircled. And the humanitarian situation is, is is growing even worse. First of all, because a lot of people have been displaced from their homes and they have nowhere else to go. Whichever neighborhood they go into, they're just being displaced again. People are moving from one neighborhood to another when they're in that other neighborhood. Then there's a gang that's moving in in that neighborhood, and then they have to move to another neighborhood.

NOEL: I want to ask you lastly, what you think should be done here. You're obviously somebody who spent a lot of time thinking about what Haiti needs and also maybe what Haiti does not need. If someone were to hand you a magic wand and say, you can fix this, but it's going to take a really good idea to fix this, what would you want done?

LOUIS-HENRI: There needs to be, a military or police counterweight to the tyranny. The armed tyranny of the gangs.

SCORING IN —AN EMPTY HOSPITAL FLOOR

There needs to be the cutting off of the supply of guns and ammunition that are coming from the United States.

*<CLIP> PBS NEWSHOUR: A recent UN report states that the principal source of guns in Haiti is Florida. Handguns sold at FL gun shows for 400-500 dollars draw as much as 20 times more in Haiti…”*

There needs to be a cut-off that supply. And for me, the best way to do that is to reinforce Haitian customs, reinforce the Haitian border. Once the supply is brought to a trickle, then the gangs will have will be more, disposed to negotiate also. The structural violence that exists in this country has to be transformed, but it cannot be transformed by more violence. We've had 200 years of violence in this country. It's not working. It's never going to work. What we need to do as a society is talk to each other and decide that we are becoming a different society.We have to break the cycles.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: CREDITS: Louis-Henry Mars in Haiti.

SPECIAL THANKS TO author and journalist MICHAEL DEIBERT.

Today’s episode was produced by Miles Bryan and edited by Matthew Collette.

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The rest of the team includes Amanda Lewellyn, Victoria Chamberlin, Avishay Artsy, Haleema Shah, Jesse Alejandro Cotrell <CAH-trull> supervising editor Amina Al-Sadi, executive producer Miranda Kennedy and my co-host Sean Rameswaram whose BBL looks fantastic; he’s back tomorrow.

We use music from Breakmaster Cylinder and Noam Hassenfeld.

We are part of the Vox Media Podcast network and are distributed to public radio stations across the US by WNYC in New York. I’m Noel King. It’s *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]