

# [***'Been there before': Haitian community leaders urge caution as Florida deploys troops to halt potential migrant surge***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BK2-17W1-JBSS-S3YG-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

March 17, 2024 Sunday 10:30 AM GMT

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**Length:** 1114 words

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**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Eliantes Jean Jacques, a Haitian immigrant who has lived in Florida for more than three decades, is long familiar with the political instability, economic turmoil, and natural disasters that have left his homeland teetering on the precipice of collapse.

But Haiti's recent [*descent into gang-fueled lawlessness and chaos*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/04/americas/haiti-ariel-henry-gangs-protests-bsap-intl-latam/index.html), Jean Jacques said, seems more ominous. The gangs appear to have more guns than the police, who have all but disappeared. Armed groups control ports and major roads. Inmates have been freed from jails. Gangs have shut down the airport. They run rampant as kidnappings and murders spread rapidly beyond the capital of Port-au-Prince.

Jean Jacques, 66, said in a phone interview that since February his 55-year-old brother and a 36-year-old cousin have been killed by the armed groups. He has not heard from his brother's children or two cousins in Haiti since last week.

"I'm afraid gangs will kill them. They don't care," said Jean Jacques, a cook in North Miami. "I cry and cry. I don't know what's going to happen."

In Florida, home to more than 270,000 people born in Haiti, residents with ties to the impoverished nation spend hours checking on friends and loved ones coping with homelessness, dwindling food supplies, violence and uncertainty. Community leaders and some elected officials question the decision of Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, to deploy more than 250 law enforcement officers and soldiers to the Florida Keys to "protect our state" and stop a possible surge of Haitian migrants fleeing the violence.

Tessa Petit, executive director of the Florida Immigrant Coalition and a native of Haiti, criticized the state's attempt to respond to the long evolving Haiti crisis with "more violence and militarization."

"I have family members who have had to leave Haiti and moved to the Dominican Republic," said Petit, whose coalition is part of a vast network of organizations providing services to the Florida's Haitian community. "It gets worse day after a day. People are dying. More and more businesses are being burned to the ground. Whatever was left is being completely destroyed."

No increase in Haitian migrants seen

A migrant surge has yet to materialize, though previous crises have forced Haitians to risk their lives by taking to the sea in hopes of reaching Florida.

"We have always been on high alert knowingthat the way Haiti has been that people will take to the sea," Petit said. "We do know that when a country is closed, the borders are closed, the airports are closed, and people are trying to flee to safety, then they're going to do whatever they can. To think that people would rather risk dying in high seas than staying home is just a confirmation of how dangerous Haiti is."

On Wednesday, DeSantis announced that he was sending additional personnel - including more than 130 soldiers - to the Keys, along with more than a dozen aircraft and boats, to stop what his office called the [*"possibility of invasion"*](https://www.flgov.com/2024/03/13/governor-desantis-deploys-additional-personnel-assets-to-southern-florida-and-the-keys-to-stop-potential-influx-of-illegal-immigration-from-haiti/) by Haitian migrants. The deployment includes officers from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission officers, and members of the Florida National Guard and Florida State Guard.

The US Coast Guard said Tuesday that it had repatriated [*65 migrants to Haiti*](https://www.news.uscg.mil/Press-Releases/Article/3704408/coast-guard-repatriates-65-migrants-to-haiti/) after they were picked up on a boat near the Bahamas. Since October 1, the Coast Guard said, it has repatriated 131 migrants to Haiti.

The Coast Guard said it has not seen an increase in migrants from Haiti in recent weeks.

DeSantis' office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

"We've sort of been there before," said Gepsie Metellus, executive director of the Sant La Haitian Neighborhood Center in North Miami, referring to previous crisis-fueled surges in migration from Haiti.

"And we always in the end harness the community resources to be able to to assist with any influx. So, are we expecting more people? Well, you know, people have been trickling in before things erupted to where we are today. Are there more people coming? It's very likely."

'It's hard to live with so much stress'

The situation in Haiti deteriorates by the day. Beleaguered [*Prime Minister Ariel Henry*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/12/americas/haiti-gangs-prime-minister-analysis-intl/index.html) announced his decision to step aside, but it is not clear who will fill the void or when. A transitional government has yet to materialize, and plans for a Kenyan-led stabilization force have stalled.

Residents leave their homes only rarely in Port-au-Prince as daily gun battles between police and gangs break out in the streets. The United Nations is planning an air bridge between Port-au-Prince and Santo Domingo, in the neighboring Dominican Republic, in an effort to bring vital supplies to the city.

Eighty percent of Port-au-Prince is now controlled by gangs, according to UN estimates. Haiti was thrown into crisis at the start of March, as gangs called for the resignation of Henry and his government.

The country is facing its most crippling security crisis in years, with some 5.5 million people - about half the population - in need of humanitarian assistance.

Henry came to power unelected in 2021 after the assassination of Haiti's then-[*President Jovenel Moise.*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/07/americas/haiti-president-jovenel-moise-attack-intl/index.html) Henry's tenure has been marred by spiraling gang violence, which intensified after he failed to hold elections last month, saying the country's insecurity would compromise the vote. On Monday, amid enormous pressure to staunch the violence, Henry stepped down.

"Everybody who has friends or family in Haiti, we wake up every day, and we check our phones to make sure whether or not we hear the news of a friend or family member who's been attacked, whose house has been completely destroyed, who has died," Petit said. "It's hard to live with so much stress on a daily basis."

Haitian community leaders and elected officials in Florida accuse DeSantis of playing ***politics*** with the plight of vulnerable refugees.

"Rather than harass refugees who are literally fleeing for their lives, to make it look like he's doing something with a show of force at the southern end of the state, we can focus state law enforcement resources on working with federal partners to make sure shipments from Florida are throughly screened for illegal arms and munitions," said Florida state Rep. Dotie Joseph, a Democrat who represents North Miami and was born in Haiti.

"We need to treat those fleeing violence with dignity and compassion, rather than manipulating the situation for political gain."

CNN's Caitlin Stephen Hu, David Culver, Evelio Contreras, Tara John, Carlos Suarez and Denise Royal contributed to this report.

By Ray Sanchez, CNN

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**Load-Date:** May 14, 2024

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