

Biden Administration Shows Little Appetite for Haiti's Troop Request

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WASHINGTON — Haiti's request for U.S. troops to help stabilize the country following the assassination of its president presents a difficult choice for President Biden: send forces to aid a neighbor even as he is trying to pare down America's military footprint overseas, or refrain and risk allowing the chaos unfolding there to escalate into a refugee crisis.

Thus far, administration officials have expressed caution about any deployment to Haiti, reflecting the fast pace of events since attackers killed President Jovenel Moïse in his home on Wednesday, but also a broader shift in American attitudes toward military interventions as the 20-year war in Afghanistan winds down.

Biden administration officials, while sympathetic to the humanitarian misery unfolding some 700 miles south of Florida, and mindful of a potential mass exodus of Haitian refugees like one that occurred in the 1990s, nevertheless show no immediate enthusiasm for sending even a limited American force into the midst of politically-based civil strife and disorder.

The administration has said it will send officials from the F.B.I. and the Department of Homeland Security to Port-au-Prince to assess how they might help assist the government's investigation into the murky circumstances of Mr. Moïse's killing.

But Pentagon officials were taken off guard by the Haitian request late Friday. While they said it would be dutifully reviewed, there is little appetite among senior military leaders to dispatch U.S. troops.

"We are aware of the request and are analyzing it," John F. Kirby, the chief Pentagon spokesman, said in a telephone interview on Saturday, noting that the request was broad and did not specify numbers or types of forces needed.

One senior administration official put it more bluntly late Friday: "There are no plans to provide U.S. military assistance at this time."

For Mr. Biden, the prospect of a deployment of American forces amid the chaotic aftermath of the brutal killing runs against his core instinct to consolidate America's overseas military presence, not expand it. The request from the Haitians came just hours after Mr. Biden delivered remarks defending his withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan after a 20-year mission that came to be ill-defined and entangled with dysfunctional Afghan politics.

For now, Biden officials are focused on other ways to assist Haiti with its security needs short of military forces. That could include stepped up training and assistance for Haiti's police and military provided by the Departments of State, Justice and Homeland Security.

Whether that can make a real difference is questionable in a country where endemic poverty and corruption have largely proved impervious to billions of dollars in international aid over decades. Haiti is "infested" by gangs, as its ambassador to Washington put it this week, the violence has worsened since Mr. Moïse's assassination, with many residents afraid to leave their homes.

On Saturday, dozens of men, women and children seeking to flee the country packed into a courtyard of the U.S. Embassy in the capital, Port-au-Prince, as competing claims to power by the interim prime minister and a group of senators seeking to establish an alternative government remained unresolved.

The sense of chaos has been exacerbated by the continuing mystery over who was behind the attack on Mr. Moïse's residence. The authorities have arrested at least 20 people, most of them former Colombian soldiers, but have not shed much light on the plot. Investigators have summoned four of the president's chief security officers for questioning next week.

Given the uncertainty over who is leading the country and its already weak institutions, the risk is that conditions could deteriorate further, setting off a mass refugee flight by sea for Florida. That would pose a humanitarian and political crisis for Mr. Biden, who is already trying to manage a surge of migrants crossing into the United States at the Mexico border.

The prospect of a refugee crisis weighed heavily on President Barack Obama when he deployed troops and \$100 million in aid to Haiti after a devastating earthquake there in 2010.

But even limited military deployments come with risks. A small American peacekeeping deployment to Somalia in 1992 led to an October 1993 gun battle in the streets of Mogadishu during which 18 American soldiers and at least hundreds of Somalis were killed in a political crisis for President Bill Clinton. The episode was later memorialized in the movie “Black Hawk Down.”

Biden officials are not insensitive to the plight of Haitians who have struggled for decades to escape poverty, corruption and political dysfunction; many served in the Obama administration when thousands of U.S. troops were dispatched for several months to provide security.

That deployment was considered a success even if it did little to resolve Haiti’s deep-seated problems. But it did run “the risk of mission creep,” according to a 2013 study by the nonpartisan RAND Corporation, which said that Haiti would have welcomed the mission “to continue indefinitely” and that it “could easily have evolved” into a longer commitment.

Mr. Biden would confront other problems with the deployment of American soldiers. It is one thing to send troops to the aftermath of an epic natural disaster. It is another to step into an environment of political chaos, intrigue and dueling claims to power — not to mention marauding armed gangs. Many Haitians, well aware of their country’s history of colonialism and slavery, already complain that their politics are shaped by mostly white foreign powers.

In 1915, the assassination of a Haitian president led President Woodrow Wilson to direct U.S. Marines to invade the country, beginning a two-decade American occupation, and years of unrest.

Some prominent Haitians were quick to denounce their government’s request.

“Absolutely not. We do not want U.S. troops, U.S. boots, U.S. uniforms, none of that,” Monique Clesca, a Haitian writer and civil society activist, told CNN on Saturday. “Because in Haiti, Haitians have been traumatized by the occupation of the country during 34 years by the United States, we do not want U.S. intervention or troops or anything.”

“The international community is complicit in what is going on in Haiti,” Ms. Clesca added.

Another disincentive for Biden is the seemingly vague nature of Haiti’s request, including what it is American troops would be expected to do.

“The best approach in Haiti is for the United States to turn to either the United Nations, the Organization of American States or a coalition of Latin American nations for a stability force,” said James G. Stavridis, a retired four-star admiral and a former head of the Pentagon’s Southern Command.

“But going into the island is very unlikely from a military standpoint, especially as we are wrapping up operations in Afghanistan,” he added.

It was under the auspices of the United Nations that the United States sent troops to Somalia in 1992, and Haiti in 1994, when Mr. Clinton approved an American force to depose a military junta on the island and restore a democratically-elected president.

For decades, the United States has sought to assist Haiti as part of the “Core Group,” an ad hoc collection of ambassadors and envoys from major Western nations and international bodies like the United Nations and the Organization of American States.

But multinational missions come with their own risks and political baggage: U.N. peacekeepers based in the country from 2004 to 2017 introduced cholera and were reported to have committed widespread rape and sexual abuse.

At the same time, Mr. Biden may also face pressure to act, especially if Haiti’s political and security situation further deteriorates.

Demands for Mr. Biden to help Haiti quickly began to build among the small community of Haitian Americans and Haitian refugees living in the United States, including in the politically important state of Florida.

About 1 million Haitians live in the United States, according to 2018 census estimates, many of them having fled earlier periods of violence and instability in their country. In the last decade, about 56,000 Haitians have been living in the United States under a program called Temporary Protected Status, which was first granted in the wake of the 2010 earthquake.

The Department of Homeland Security renewed the T.P.S. designation this year, citing “serious security concerns, social unrest, an increase in human rights abuses, crippling poverty and lack of basic resources, which are exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.”

Now, activists are pushing Mr. Biden to ensure that America does not stand on the sidelines as the country descends further into chaos.

One development that would intensify pressure on Mr. Biden to act would be if Haitians began fleeing the country in numbers resembling the wave of refugees that headed toward Florida in the early 1990s. President George H.W. Bush detained some refugees at the Guantánamo Bay naval base, drawing liberal outrage, and Mr. Clinton later directed the Coast Guard to repatriate Haitians intercepted at sea.

Admiral Stavridis said that a Haitian refugee wave could change the Biden administration calculus, adding that the military has developed contingency plans to handle a sudden influx of people.

Natalie Kitroeff contributed reporting from Mexico City, and Jesus Jiménez from Dallas.