

## **Firearms Trafficking in the Caribbean: Haiti's Unrest and the Neighbors Next Door**

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Firearms trafficking is one of the main drivers of the Caribbean's soaring violence, with Haiti reaching a breaking point. The country not only currently faces a catastrophic humanitarian situation and gang-related violence, but also a firearms crisis created and fueled by transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) operating in and around Haiti and threatening the security of neighboring countries.

In August 2022, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said it had seen a substantial increase in the number of weapons illegally trafficked into Haiti and the Caribbean. "In the wrong hands, these weapons could cause mass casualty," the DHS said in a statement.

TCOs smuggle weapons into the region and sell them to local gangs and dealers to further criminal enterprises such as the recent blockade of the Port-au-Prince fuel terminal, on-going gang wars, or the guns for drugs trade. According to a July statement from United Nations (U.N.) Human Rights Office Spokesperson Jeremy Laurence, more than 930 people were killed from January to end of June 2022 in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince. Between June and August, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a U.N. agency, identified more than 113,000 internally displaced persons in Haiti, 96,000 of whom fled insecurity in the capital.

"We don't know how many [weapons] go through. We don't know how many are left to go through. But it's a lucrative business," Ronald Lareche, a former senator, who served on the Haitian parliamentary security commission, told *Reuters* in late July.

InSight Crime, an organization that studies organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean, places the number of illegal firearms in Haiti to be between 270,000 and 500,000 according to varying sources.

“The destabilizing accumulation, illicit transfer and misuse of small arms and light weapons continue to initiate, sustain, and exacerbate armed conflict and pervasive crime. Small arms and light weapons remain a primary tool for armed conflict and violence, and the cross-cutting humanitarian impact of illicit flows remains a serious concern,” U.N. Secretary General António Guterres said in a September 2020 report. “With over 270,000 illicit firearms in the possession of civilians [in Haiti], compounded by illicit cross-border trafficking, crime has reached unacceptable heights.”

### **Spreading terror**

In mid-September 2022, an estimated 200 gangs moved into Port-au-Prince, controlling around 60 percent of the city, *ABC News* reported. Gangs took over and blocked access to Terminal Verraux, the main source of fuel for the country, leading to fuel shortages that shut down hospitals and water providers, just as the country confirmed an outbreak of cholera, the U.N. said in a statement. In early November, Haitian Police regained control of the terminal, putting an end to a paralyzing two-month blockade.

These gangs have been spreading terror across the civilian population, which Special Representative of the U.N. Secretary General of Haiti Helen La Lime stating in mid-October, “under such a state of persistent civil unrest, violence, and looting, basic rights are being flagrantly undermined across the country. Gangs continue to injure, kidnap, rape, and kill.”

Many of the people killed are innocent civilians, including women and young children, some shot in public executions, others kidnapped or recruited to join gangs with minors receiving training in the use of weapons, British daily *The Guardian* reported. Cité Soleil, a suburb of Port-au-Prince, is at the center of the violence, where 209 people have been killed in just 10 days between July 8 and 17, U.N. figures indicated.

### **Next door**

Haiti’s neighbor, the Dominican Republic (D.R.), is equally concerned about gang-related violence and its potential spillover into its territory. One such concern is the possibility that

Dominican nationals could join TCOs or gangs in Haiti, thus contributing to the spread of firearms and crime on the island, InSight Crime indicated.

In March 2021, D.R. President Luis Abinader said that there were up to three illegal weapons for each of the 238,000 registered firearms in the country, Dominican daily *Diario Libre* reported. According to InSight Crime, Dominican authorities seized nearly 5,000 weapons between April 2019 and March 2022.

At least one Dominican national was apprehended with gangs in Haiti, with concerns rising that more may be uncovered due to Dominicans living in Haiti or crossing the border into Haiti, *Dominican Today* reported in June. The Dominican man in custody, a key member of a Haitian gang, said that “legions of Dominicans are an integral part of the armed gangs that operate in Haiti” and that “each [Haitian] gang group has Dominican nationals in its ranks,” the Dominican daily reported. Furthermore, Haitian police have confirmed the seizure of weapons sent from D.R., adding to concerns that TCOs are using existing tension and weaknesses to exploit opportunities.

Close by, Jamaica is also feeling the effect of TCOs operating in the region. Jamaica, which earned the top spot as the Caribbean country with the worst murder rate in 2021, according to InSight Crime, continues to see a rise in violence, specifically related to gun violence.

Some 200 illegal weapons come in from Haiti each month, or about 2,400 illicit guns each year, the *Jamaica Gleaner* said in an early October editorial. Criminal gangs in Jamaica and Haiti have been engaging in the exchange of marihuana, cocaine to a smaller extent, for guns, better known as the guns for drugs trade.

“In September alone we have had 19 incidents of multiple murders, 18 double murders and a triple murder,” Jamaican Police Commissioner Major General Antony Anderson said, the *Jamaica Star Daily* reported. According to the Jamaican Police, between January and October 1, 2022, 1,171 people have been killed, or 86 more than in the same period in 2021.

“Between January 1 and September 30 [2022], the police have recovered 583 illegal weapons, which represented an 11 percent increase over the corresponding period in 2021,” Maj. Gen. Anderson said. “[The] gun has been the weapon of choice in 85 percent of murders and 79 percent of robberies committed for more than a decade.”

### **Operation Trigger VII**

Countries in the region have been stepping up efforts to curb arms and drug trafficking. Recently on October 13, INTERPOL released the results of Trigger VII, the first joint firearms interdiction operation conducted with the Caribbean community (CARICOM) Implementation Agency for Crime and Security (IMPACS). During the September operation, authorities from 19 countries made a total of 510 arrests and seized some 350 weapons, 3,300 rounds of ammunition, 10.1 tons of cocaine, and 2.5 tons of cannabis.

“The results of operation Trigger VII show how firearms are clear enablers of most types of crime. When we go after their weapons, we also go after the full range of activities carried out by organized crime groups,” INTERPOL Secretary General Jürgen Stock said, according to the agency’s statement.

“Without these cohesive action among agencies, our region will not be able to effectively tackle illicit trafficking and by extension transnational organized crime,” Barbados Defence Force Lieutenant Colonel Michael Jones, executive director of CARICOM IMPACS, said.

According to Stephen Kavanagh, INTERPOL executive director of Police Services, the operation would likely continue to bring results in the coming months as investigations are ongoing.

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