

Haiti: Carnival Tragedy — U.S., France and Canada Are Accessories to the Crime Wave and Gang Wars

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Global Research, February 26, 2015

[Haïti Liberté](#) 25 February 2015

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

In-depth Report: [HAITI](#)

Image: Cité Soleil, population 400,000, was paralyzed by gang violence on February 23, 2015.

This past week, Haitians in Port-au-Prince were already grieving after at least 18 people died in a Carnaval stampede at around 2 a.m. on Feb. 17.

Daniel “Fantom” Darius, the lead singer Barikad Crew, was standing atop a towering Carnaval float when his head struck a high-voltage wire strung across the street, producing an electrical explosion that panicked the tightly packed crowd below. (Ironically, Darius survived.) Some 76 other people were hospitalized with serious injuries, bringing this year’s toll of Carnaval wounded to 123, even though the final day’s celebration was cancelled and replaced with an official memorial ceremony where the tragedy struck.

Many blame the government of President Michel Martelly and Prime Minister Evans Paul, already beleaguered by massive demonstrations demanding their resignations, for the accident, citing “criminal negligence.”

Then this past week, violence flared between two armed gangs in the capital’s sprawling shanty town of Cité Soleil, resulting in at least eight dead, according to government officials. Neighborhood residents put the death toll at about 20.

One gang is controlled by a former prisoner, Gabriel Jean-Baptiste, who is said to be close to the Martelly/Paul government, while the other is controlled by former deputy Alméthis Junior.



Sonise Pierre, 16 years old, was killed by bandits in Cité Soleil on Dec. 20, 2014 as she went to buy some food for her mother.

The gang war brought all activity to a stand-still in Cité Soleil on

Mon., Feb. 23. Schools, businesses, and even informal commerce stopped in the slum of 400,000.

Reynald Joli-Fils, the Martelly-appointed mayor of the area, said that the neighborhoods of Bélécourt, Boston, and Brooklyn were particularly paralyzed. Gang wars between rival groups have always existed, he said, usually for control of an area.

But local residents say harder-than-ever economic woes and the unstable political situation have contributed to the upsurge in gang violence. Joli-Fils complained that the Haitian police do not have sufficient resources to overcome the turf wars which have flared since October 2014 and called on the national government to intervene quickly so as to prevent the situation from becoming even worse.

While there is said to be a police shortage to stem violence in Haiti's slums, there appear to be enough officers to ensure the safety of people close to the President. For example, Martelly's long-time personal friend Roro Nelson holds no official post in the government but has several police agents providing him security. Other presidential advisors and consultants enjoy the same privilege.

Meanwhile, bandits are wreaking havoc around the capital. Fri., Feb. 13 was a particularly bad day. On Avenue Martin Luther King in Nazon, used by vehicles heading to the Toussaint Louverture International Airport, two gunmen on a motorcycle opened fire on two other young men on a motorcycle who had just withdrawn 7,500 gourdes (\$160) from a bank. The shots killed Emmanuel Sanon, who was driving the motorcycle, and the thieves made off with the money.

Meanwhile at around 3 p.m., an armed commando burst into the Office of Insurance, Injuries, Sickness and Maternity (OFATMA), located in Cité Militaire in the capital's northwest corner. The attack killed two and wounded five others.

One young man, trying to escape over the OFATMA hospital fence, was shot with 15 bullets and died on the spot. The other casualty was a member of the hospital's security staff. According to an OFATMA official, this crime was the result of clashes among local armed gangs, particularly those in Cite Soleil and Simon-Pelé.

The same day there was another robbery which claimed one life in Tabarre near Carrefour Fleuriot. Many link the rise in crime to the high cost of living, which is a direct consequence of the high price fixed by the government for petroleum products, despite continuing protests. Others ask what invisible hands may be behind the crime wave.

Who supplies the armed gangs with weapons and ammunition? Does the crime provide profits for those in power and the country's financial oligarchy? What role do bankers play in the many suspicious robberies against exiting bank customers, where criminals often know the exact amount of cash their victims withdrew?

Reflecting the crisis, the United States, Canada, and France have issued travel advisories to their citizens visiting Haiti. "Repeated strikes and demonstrations pose risks of violent incidents and especially roadblocks that impede travel," the French Embassy wrote. "It is recommended to stay away from crowds." The French also warned about "armed attacks at the exit of the Port-au-Prince airport," noting that "attacks can target a particular vehicle leaving the airport on the day of arrival or the next day, having been tracked by gangs."



Scene of injured being carried away after stampede during Carnival on Feb. 17.

In a Feb. 9 statement, the Canadian Foreign Affairs Ministry told its citizens to be particularly wary of the capital's districts of Martissant, Carrefour, Bel Air and Cité Soleil since "these neighborhoods are dangerous because of rampant crime and the reduced ability of local authorities to maintain order... The police are not able to respond quickly to calls for assistance in these areas. It is strongly advised not to go out after dark."

The Canadian warning continues: "The crime rate is high and the security situation is unpredictable. Be very vigilant, no matter where you are in the country. Crime is present, especially in major centers such as downtown Port-au-Prince, which armed gangs continue to plague. There were reports of murders, kidnappings, robberies, burglaries and carjackings, even in daylight. Never walk alone and do not walk after dark. Many gang leaders and criminals incarcerated in the Croix-des-Bouquets Civil Penitentiary (located east of Port-au-Prince) escaped in 2014 and are still at large. Haiti periodically experiences civil unrest, especially during times of political uncertainty and elections. The dissolution of Parliament in Haiti on Jan. 13, 2015, and the current electoral situation has heightened tensions in the capital and across the country. Demonstrations are underway and could lead to violence. Riots can occur with little or no notice. Exercise great caution, avoid demonstrations, and regularly monitor local media to keep abreast of the situation."

In short, the lawlessness that President Martelly has encouraged and engaged in at the highest levels of government and through promoting a policy of impunity has percolated down and begun to manifest itself throughout Haitian society. The support of the U.S., French, and Canadian Embassies for Martelly's regime have made them, at the very least, accessories to the crime wave victimizing, above all, the Haitian working poor.

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