

## OVERVIEW

In 2023, Haiti saw a significant increase in gang violence. Gangs killed an estimated 4,800 people, over twice the number of victims recorded in 2022 (GCR2P 24/01/2024). Many were killed by gunshots fired during violent clashes (BINUH 01/02/2024). Almost 85% of the killings and injuries reported in 2023 occurred in the Port-au-Prince Metropolitan Zone (ZMPAP), Ouest department. Violence also increased outside of the capital, particularly in Artibonite department (UN News 25/01/2024; US Dept. of State 22/02/2024). In the last two months of 2023, gang influence expanded rapidly in ZMPAP neighbourhoods and communes that were previously less affected, including Carrefour-Feuilles, Solino, Bon Repos, Mariani, and Léogâne (BINUH 15/01/2024).

The situation has deteriorated further in 2024. January was the country's most violent month in two years, with over 800 people who were not directly involved in violence killed, injured, or abducted (OCHA 12/02/2024). From February, violence escalated in several neighbourhoods in and around ZMPAP, including Croix-des-Bouquets, La Saline, Cité Soleil, Carrefour, and Tabarre (OCHA 19/02/2024; UNICEF 13/02/2024; AfricaNews 14/02/2024). As at 15 February, escalating violence had displaced around 20,000 people across ZMPAP since the beginning of the year (WFP 15/02/2024; UNICEF 13/02/2024).

From 29 February, gangs have launched coordinated attacks aimed at overthrowing Prime Minister Ariel Henry's administration. The attacks have targeted the international airport, police stations, the national penitentiary in Port-au-Prince, and a prison in Croix-des-Bouquets commune, allowing almost all 4,000 detainees in the national penitentiary to escape (The Guardian 04/03/2024; BBC 04/03/2024; Al Jazeera 04/03/2024; NPR 05/03/2024). Gangs attempted to capture the airport to prevent Henry, who had been in Kenya, from re-entering Haiti. Henry's plane was diverted to Puerto Rico on 5 March (BBC 06/03/2024; France24 06/03/2024).

The violence since 29 February has displaced at least 15,000 people, many of whom were already IDPs, from affected parts of ZMPAP, mostly to new sites in the capital (IOM 13/02/2024; Al Jazeera 06/03/2024). The IDPs have limited access to humanitarian assistance and no way of meeting basic needs (OCHA 06/03/2024). While access constraints have prevented authorities or responders from determining a death toll from the recent escalation, MSF reported 'massive' casualties as at 5 March, with five to ten new patients presenting daily at its hospital in Tabarre commune (MSF 05/03/2024; France24 06/03/2024).

Largely because of rising insecurity, there are an estimated 1.6 million people in need of protection assistance in Haiti in 2024. These are primarily in ZMPAP and account for almost 15% of the country's population (OCHA 19/01/2024; REACH 24/10/2023). Major protection risks in ZMPAP include death and injury from direct attacks and crossfire, abductions, sexual violence, and recruitment of children into armed gangs (REACH 24/10/2023 and 12/2023).

### About this report

**Aim:** this report provides an update on the protection situation in ZMPAP, identifying several severe and/or widespread protection risks and affected groups. It highlights a deterioration in the protection situation throughout 2023 and into 2024, particularly in the context of worsening violence in February and March 2024.

For a more in-depth, multisectoral analysis of how gang violence has affected the humanitarian situation country-wide since 2021, see ACAPS' previous report on the humanitarian impact of gang violence (ACAPS 06/2023).

**Methodology and limitations:** the report is based on a secondary data review of publicly available sources. Given severe access constraints in Haiti, particularly in gang-controlled areas of ZMPAP, there is a lack of comprehensive information on the type and extent of protection risks and affected groups. The risk of gang reprisals contributes to consistent underreporting of some protection threats, including sexual violence and abductions.

## KEY FINDINGS AND FIGURES

- **Nearly 60% of the 650 ZMPAP households surveyed for a 2023 Multisectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA) conducted by REACH reported severe or higher (3+ on a 1-5 scale) protection needs**, with 43% reporting extreme or very extreme (4-5/5) protection needs (REACH 24/10/2023).
- **Blockades, checkpoints, and violence imposed movement restrictions on 52% of ZMPAP households** surveyed for the 2023 MSNA (REACH 24/10/2023). In recent months, increased gang control and violence in parts of ZMPAP have subjected civilians to confinement (RFI 26/02/2024; GIATO 12/02/2024).
- The number of **people in need of protection assistance related to gender-based violence (GBV) has increased by almost 140%**, from around 500,000 in the 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan to around 1.2 million in the 2024 Humanitarian Response Plan. Over half the people targeted for GBV assistance in 2024 are located in Ouest department (OCHA 19/01/2024 and 19/07/2023).
- 1,895 (70%) of the approximately 2,700 sexual violence cases reported between January and November 2023 involved children (UNICEF 13/02/2024).
- **Recruitment of children into armed gangs is an ongoing threat to children's safety and wellbeing.** As at January 2024, an estimated 30-50% of gang members were minors (OCHA 19/01/2024).

## ANTICIPATED SCOPE AND SCALE

- **The February–March 2024 escalation in coordinated, anti-government gang violence may cause significant insecurity and associated humanitarian needs in coming weeks.** On 6 March, Jimmy Cherizier, leader of the G9 gang federation – one of two dominant gang federations in ZMPAP – threatened civil war and ‘genocide’ unless Prime Minister Henry resigns (Al Jazeera 06/03/2024). The gang assault comes after weeks of civilian protests focusing on Henry’s failure to hold elections and tackle poverty, gang violence, and other key drivers of humanitarian needs (OHCHR 09/02/2024; BBC 08/02/2024). In accordance with a December 2022 agreement with civil society actors, Henry was due to hold presidential elections by 7 February 2024, but failed to do so, citing insecurity (CNN 08/02/2024; BBC 08/02/2024). On 28 February, Henry pledged to hold elections by mid-2025 and collaborate with opposition and civil society groups to prepare for the vote (AP 29/02/2024). However, escalating gang violence indicates that this pledge will do little to minimise insecurity in 2024.
- **The prospective deployment of a non-UN multinational security support mission, led by Kenya, to support the Haitian National Police (HNP) in 2024 may improve short-term security in some parts of ZMPAP.** Kenyan court proceedings delayed deployment of

the mission, which was initially authorized by the UN Security Council in October 2023 (GIATO 12/02/2024). On 1 March 2024, Kenya and Haiti finalised an agreement designed to overcome a Kenyan court’s decision that the deployment would be unconstitutional. However, it may still take several months to fund, train, and deploy forces from Kenya and other contributing countries (NYT 01/03/2024; Reuters 30/01/2024; The Guardian 05/03/2024; Al Jazeera 01/03/2024). Once deployed, the mission may improve short-term security in and around ZMPAP, potentially increasing access along routes into the capital. That said, in parts of ZMPAP under entrenched gang control, the mission’s operations will likely prompt violent resistance, increasing protection risks. The mission’s presence in ZMPAP may also encourage gangs to shift their activities to north and south of the capital, heightening protection risks in other departments (OCHA 19/01/2024). Furthermore, any improvement in short-term security will not be sustainable without reforms that address root causes of violence, including weak political and security institutions, poverty, weapons trafficking, and drug trafficking (ACLEDD 17/01/2024).

- The April 2023 formation of an **anti-gang vigilante movement, known as Bwa Kale**, and the creation of a retaliatory movement among gang members, known as Zam Pale, has triggered what the UN Secretary General described as ‘**a new and alarming cycle of violence**’ in ZMPAP (HRW accessed 29/02/2024). There is a risk that vigilante groups associated with Bwa Kale, which have killed both gang members and civilians, will engage in increased criminal activity and adopt other gang-like practices throughout 2024 (GIATO 12/02/2024; OCHA 19/01/2024; ACLED 17/01/2024). The 2 March prison attacks and release of detainees, including gang leaders, may strengthen existing gangs and cause new ones to form (ACLEDD 06/03/2024).

## HUMANITARIAN ACCESS

**Escalating violence in February and March has worsened humanitarian access to and within ZMPAP** (OCHA 19/02/2024; WFP 15/02/2024). On 3 March, the government declared a state of emergency until 6 March, which can be extended for 72 hours at a time. This includes a curfew from 6pm to 5am and the cancellation of all flights to Port-au-Prince international airport, which, as at 6 March, was effectively closed. Burning tires block some roads in affected parts of ZMPAP, while residents have blockaded others (Al Jazeera 04/03/2024 and 05/03/2024; BBC 06/03/2024; France24 06/03/2024). Violence is preventing access to the main port, impeding responders’ access to medical and other humanitarian supplies (MSF 05/03/2024).

This situation compounds existing access constraints in and around ZMPAP, where **frequent gang checkpoints prevent humanitarian access to neighbourhoods** and key routes in and out of the capital (GIATO 12/02/2024). Humanitarians are often stopped at checkpoints and asked for money in exchange for access (IRC 25/01/2024). As at February 2024, the checkpoints that were perceived to be most difficult to pass were those in and out of Port-au-Prince on the route to Artibonite, and those in Canaan and Martissant (GIATO 12/02/2024).

From August to November 2023, Port-au-Prince commune reported the highest number of humanitarian access incidents within ZMPAP (71), followed by Croix-de-Bouquets (59), and Pétion-Ville (41) (OCHA 25/12/2023). Since September 2023, there have been increased gang clashes over control of National Roads 1, 3, 8, and the 101. These roads enable travel between ZMPAP and the rest of the country, including for the purpose of trade and humanitarian assistance. Gangs along National Road 1, which connects Port-au-Prince to Gonaïves and Cap Haïtien, regularly abduct, kill, and commit sexual violence against travellers on this road (GIATO 12/02/2024; BINUH 01/02/2024).

Map 1. Relevant communes and national roads in and around ZMPAP.



Source: GIATO 12/02/2024

## KEY PROTECTION IMPACTS OF INCREASED GANG VIOLENCE IN ZMPAP

### Restrictions on movement and confinement

**Increased restrictions on movement in gang-controlled areas in recent months have created a situation of confinement for many ZMPAP residents** (RFI 26/02/2024). Gangs seek to prevent people from entering and exiting areas under their control, and build walls, trenches, and checkpoints to prevent incursions by other gangs or police (GIATO 12/02/2024). The 2023 MSNA found that 52% of surveyed households in ZMPAP were affected by movement restrictions because of gang-imposed blockades. Gang-imposed bans on moving house affected 26% of surveyed households, and the impossibility of travelling into areas controlled by rival gangs affected 24% (REACH 24/10/2023). This situation has likely worsened in response to the increased gang violence and clashes in 2024.

**Restrictions on movement prevent affected communities from accessing services, livelihoods, and assistance, and from fleeing violence.** This potentially increases civilian casualties from fighting (RFI 26/01/2024; GIATO 12/02/2024). When civilians are permitted to move around and between gang-controlled areas, they are exposed to violence, including kidnapping and sexual violence, at checkpoints and in 'buffer zones' between the territories of rival gangs (GIATO 12/02/2024).

The state of emergency and curfew declared by the government on 3 March may aggravate restrictions on movement for communities in ZMPAP.

### Killings and injuries

**ZMPAP residents are vulnerable to both direct and indirect violence from gang attacks, leading to injuries and deaths.** Over 8,400 people were reported as being killed, injured, or kidnapped in 2023, over double the number reported in 2022 (AP 29/02/2024 and 26/01/2024). It is likely that the actual figures were higher because of underreporting and lack of access.

Random and indiscriminate mass shootings in ZMPAP neighbourhoods frequently kill residents (UN SC 15/01/2024). According to a 2023 MSNA, 29% of surveyed households in ZMPAP considered **gunshot deaths and injuries to be the main protection risks for men, and 20% considered being killed or injured by a stray bullet to be a major risk for women.** Children were also perceived to be vulnerable to gunshot deaths and injuries. 22% of surveyed households in ZMPAP considered gunshot injuries to be a significant risk for boys, and 26% of households in the Port-au-Prince commune (a commune within ZMPAP) considered gunshot injuries to be a major risk for girls (REACH 24/10/2023). **In 2023, gunfire**

**killed or injured over 160 children** (OCHA 12/02/2024). As at 19 February 2024, clashes since the beginning of the month had killed two fleeing children and injured several others, in some cases causing permanent disability (OCHA 19/02/2024).

## Kidnappings

There were around **2,500 reported kidnappings in 2023**, although it is estimated that the true number could be up to 50 times higher. This represented an 83% increase compared to the number of kidnappings reported in 2022 (GIATO 12/02/2024). Mass kidnappings target people travelling north and south out of ZMPAP on public transport, with recent increases in the Carrefour and Gressier communes of Ouest department (UN SC 15/01/2024). Commuters on public transport, business owners, and government workers are most at risk of kidnapping, which also targets lawyers, healthcare workers, international organisation staff, and students (BINUH 15/01/2024; BINUH/OHCHR 10/2022).

Further, **kidnappings increasingly affect women and children**, who are targeted for ransom or as a tactical manoeuvre in gang warfare (BINUH 01/02/2024; UNICEF 07/08/2023). A 2023 MSNA found that the risk of women being kidnapped was perceived to be particularly high in the Croix-des-Bouquets commune, where 27% of the surveyed households identified this risk (REACH 24/10/2023). Survivor and witness testimony indicates that sexual violence against kidnapped women is common, but under-reported. Some kidnappers use footage of rapes to pressure families for ransoms (BINUH/OHCHR 10/2022; UN SC 15/01/2024).

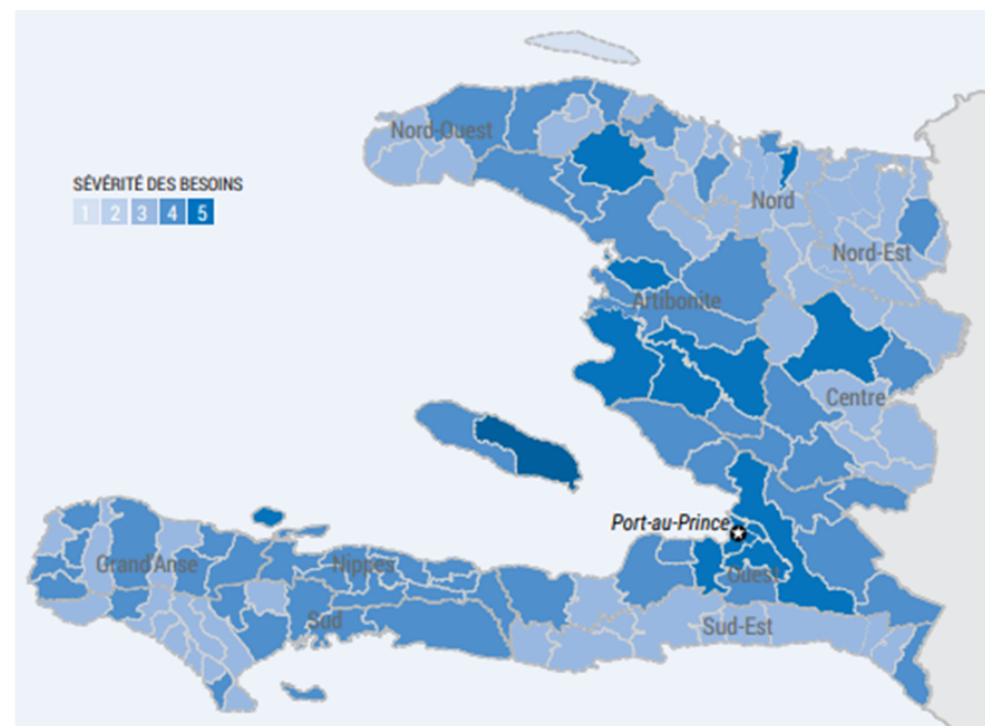
## Other forms of gender-based violence

**Incidents of rape and sexual assault perpetrated by gangs appear to have increased in ZMPAP.** In January to October 2023, there was a 50% rise in reported cases of rape compared to the same period in 2022 (OCHA 19/01/2024). 'Many' new sexual violence cases were reported in the parts of ZMPAP affected by increased violence throughout February 2024 (OCHA 19/02/2024). Prior to these reported increases, rates of GBV, including rape and sexual assault, were already high. A December 2022 study, which surveyed and interviewed around 600 girls and women from the Cité Soleil neighbourhood, found that 80% had experienced some form of GBV. 43% of these GBV survivors reported experiencing at least one type of sexual violence, primarily perpetrated by current or former partners (44%) or strangers, including gang members and kidnappers (33%) (GIATO 04/05/2023). These findings likely underrepresent actual rates because of frequent underreporting of GBV.

Gangs rely on rape and sexual assault as a weapon of war, including against rival gang members and their associates, and to assert territorial control and dominance over

communities. This includes use of mass rapes, sometimes perpetrated in public, to terrify and 'discipline' populations. There have also been recent reports of sexual slavery in ZMPAP, including rape and torture perpetrated over several weeks (GIATO 12/02/2024). Gangs share videos and images of rape on social media, cultivating fear among communities under their control (OHCHR 09/02/2024).

## Map 2. Severity of GBV-related needs across Haiti in 2024



Source: OCHA 19/01/2024

**Women, especially young women, are particularly vulnerable to GBV.** In 2024, they comprise 97% of the almost 1.2 million people in need of GBV assistance in Haiti (Govt. of Haiti/Protection Cluster/UNFPA 30/11/2023; Concern 20/02/2024). Poverty aggravates the risk of sexual exploitation, as families encourage female members to develop sexual relationships with members of armed gangs in exchange for basic goods (Govt. of Haiti/Protection Cluster/UNFPA 30/11/2023; BINUH/OHCHR 10/2022). Young IDP women in particular resort to survival sex as a coping strategy (Concern 20/02/2024). Further, IDP women are at increased risk of GBV

in overcrowded, insecure IDP sites, particularly when collecting food, water, and firewood, and using WASH facilities without adequate lighting or gender separation. Conditions in IDP camps also increase the risk of intimate partner violence (Concern 20/02/2024; UNFPA 02/02/2024).

**There is limited access to GBV-related services and supplies for GBV survivors**, including clinical management of rape kits (Govt. of Haiti/Protection Cluster/UNFPA 30/11/2023). A 2023 MSNA found that households in the Ouest department, where ZMPAP is located, were the least aware of specialised GBV services for women and girls in their community, with only 7% aware of these services (REACH 24/10/2023). Even where services exist, women often avoid reporting GBV for fear of retaliation from perpetrators and social stigma (GIATO 04/05/2023).

### Child protection threats

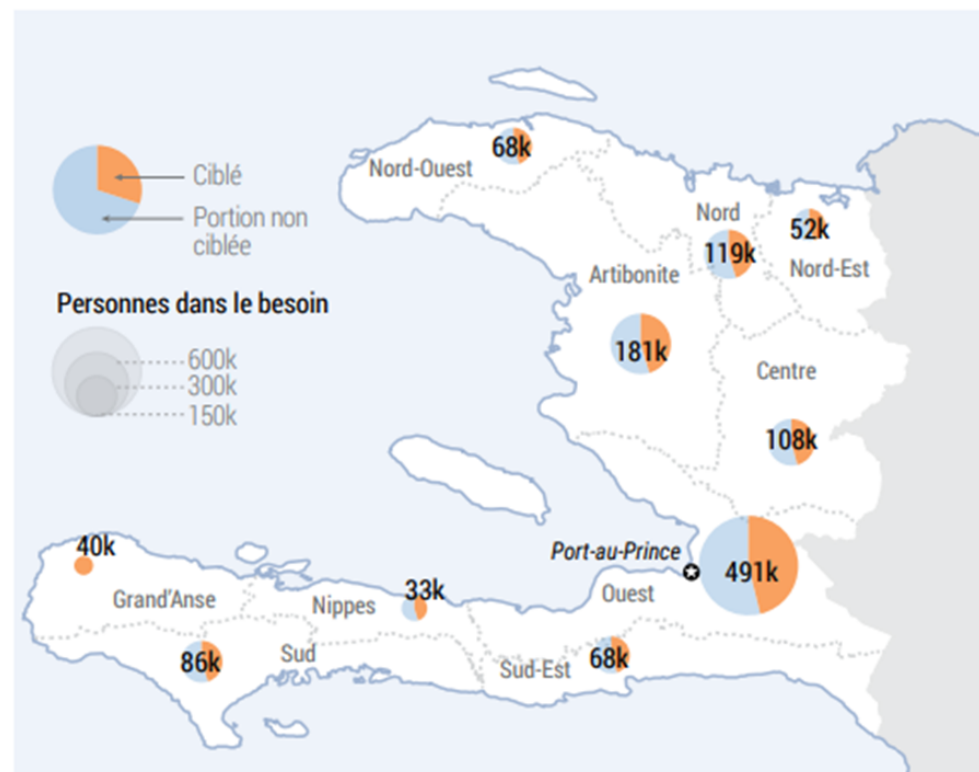
As at February 2024, UNICEF estimated that over one-third of Haitian children (around two million children) required protection assistance (UNICEF 13/02/2024; UNICEF 27/12/2023).

**Recruitment of children into armed gangs is an increasing child protection issue**, particularly in the context of escalating fighting between gangs and vigilante groups in ZMPAP (OCHA 19/02/2024; HRW accessed 29/02/2024). As at January 2024, an estimated 30-50% of gang members were minors (OCHA 19/01/2024). A 2023 MSNA found that 14% of surveyed households in ZMPAP, including 44% of those in the Cité Soleil neighbourhood, considered recruitment by an armed gang to be a major protection risk for boys (REACH 24/10/2023). Girls are also vulnerable to recruitment and exploitation, including sexual exploitation, by armed gangs (UN SC 15/01/2024). Some children join armed gangs for fear of reprisals against themselves and their families. Others join because of severe needs, given they have little to no access to basic services and goods (UN News 31/01/2024; OCHA 19/01/2024). Children who have sought to leave gangs risk reprisal killings (GIATO 12/02/2024).

**Displaced children are particularly vulnerable to protection threats, including being unaccompanied.** As at January 2024, over 50% (170,000) of 313,000 IDPs across Haiti were children (OCHA 12/02/2024). Some children are separated from their parents and become unaccompanied minors when fleeing violence (Concern 20/02/2024).

**Limited access to education increases children's risk of child protection threats**, including the risk that they become involved with armed gangs and experience social exclusion and GBV (UNICEF 15/02/2024 and 26/12/2023; UN SC 15/01/2024). As at July 2023, insecurity had forced around 755 schools in Ouest and Artibonite departments to close (UNICEF 15/02/2024). As at mid-February 2024, around 135 schools in the Artibonite and Ouest departments were being used by groups other than students, including IDPs and armed gangs (OCHA 12/02/2024). In February, fighting forced 15 schools in affected areas of Port-Au-Prince alone to close (OCHA 19/02/2024). The situation has likely deteriorated further since fighting escalated from 29 February.

Map 3. Children in need of protection assistance in 2024, by department



Source: (OCHA 19/01/2024)

### Access to services and infrastructure

**Violence, other restrictions on movement, and confinement in ZMPAP restrict residents' access to basic services and infrastructure** (IRC 25/01/2024; OCHA 19/01/2024). There are no sanitation services in many gang-controlled areas of ZMPAP, where waste and rubbish accumulate on the streets (GIATO 12/02/2024). As at August 2023, 61% of ZMPAP households surveyed for an MSNA had WASH needs that were severe or higher (3+ on a 1-5 scale) (REACH 12/2023). IDPs have particularly low access to basic services and infrastructure, including WASH facilities (OCHA 19/01/2024).

Armed gangs often target or occupy schools and healthcare facilities, forcing them to cease operations. As at 6 March 2024, only one major healthcare facility in Port-au-Prince was operational (OCHA 06/03/2024). Violence and occupation by armed groups has caused others to close at increasing rates since October 2023 (OCHA 19/02/2024; BINUH 01/02/2024).

## DRIVERS

### Gang violence

**As at February 2024, there were an estimated 200 gangs in Haiti**, with membership ranging from fewer than 100 members to several thousands (GCR2P 29/02/2024; GIATO 12/02/2024). In the past few years, gangs have evolved from relatively unstructured organisations dependent on public or private support into professionalised, hierarchical forces that are capable of self-funding and govern significant territory. Stronger gangs now replace government forces in Port-au-Prince and rural southern and central departments. These gangs increasingly control critical infrastructure, including ports and roads (GIATO 12/02/2024; ICG 03/07/2023).

Many gangs in Port-au-Prince belong to one of two major federations: G9 and GPèp. In 2023, the G9 – GPèp rivalry continued to spur violence in Port-au-Prince. Violence was also fuelled by increased activity of gangs independent from the two major federations, which have clashed over southern routes into the capital in Carrefour and Port-au-Prince communes (ACLEDD 17/01/2024).

In spring 2023, **the Bwa Kale vigilante group emerged in Port-au-Prince to counter gang control**. Bwa Kale has engaged in public lynching and killings of gang members and their alleged associates (GIATO 12/02/2024; OCHA 19/01/2024).

### Political instability and weak institutions

**There are currently no elected officials serving in Haiti**, as the mandate of all senators expired in January 2023 (The Guardian 10/01/2023). Prime Minister Ariel Henry was never approved by parliament and has ruled by decree since July 2021 (HRW accessed 29/02/2024).

**The current political crisis has weakened security and justice institutions, enabling gangs to expand their control with impunity** (OAS 21/02/2024). The HNP faces significant personnel and equipment shortages. Fewer than 3,500 members of the already relatively small, 14,000-strong police force are available to actively patrol. These numbers are frequently decreasing as HNP personnel are victims of killings, extortion, and threats by gangs (GIATO 12/02/2024; France24 28/09/2023; ACLEDD 17/01/2024). In recent months, gang members have

increasingly conducted repeated operations against police stations, which aim to remove the police presence from ZMPAP (BINUH 15/01/2024). There are also allegations of collusion between gangs and HNP personnel, and HNP involvement in violence against civilians, including extrajudicial killings (HRW accessed 29/02/2024; ACLEDD 17/01/2024).

Violence, corruption, strikes, and politicisation have effectively incapacitated Haiti's justice system, leading to widespread impunity for violations of human rights and international humanitarian law (HRW accessed 29/02/2024).

## COMPOUNDING FACTORS

### Economic crisis, access to livelihoods, and food insecurity

**Haiti is the poorest country in Latin America and one of the poorest in the world**, with more than 90% of the population living in poverty. 2023 was the country's third consecutive year of economic recession (WB accessed 29/02/2024; Health Cluster/WHO 05/09/2023). Violence and associated movement restrictions have disrupted harvests, access to markets, livelihood activities, supply chains, and the transport of people and goods (FAO 02/02/2024). The expansion of gang activity in Artibonite, where gangs threaten, extort, and displace farmers and communities, has decreased food production in the department, which is considered Haiti's food basket (GIATO 12/02/2024). Further, climate has negatively affected food production, including a delayed 2023 rainy season, low rainfall, and then excess rainfall in mid-November. This has contributed to deficits of 39%, 34% and 22% in the production of maize, rice, and sorghum respectively (FAO 02/02/2024). These factors have led to 'Crisis' (IPC Phase 3) or above levels of food insecurity among an estimated 4.4 million Haitians, or 45% of the population, with these levels projected to continue until at least June 2024 (IPC 20/09/2023).

These economic, livelihood, and food security pressures **increase the likelihood that people may resort to harmful coping mechanisms that pose protection risks**, including begging, harmful forms of child labour, and survival sex.