UN-backed contingent of foreign police arrives in Haiti as Kenya-led force prepares to face gangs

AP – The first U.N.-backed contingent of foreign police arrived in Haiti on Tuesday, nearly two years after the troubled Caribbean country urgently requested help to quell a surge in gang violence.

A couple hundred police officers from Kenya landed in the capital of Port-au-Prince, whose main international airport reopened in late May after gang violence forced it to close for nearly three months.

It wasn't immediately known what the Kenyans' first assignment would be, but they will face violent gangs that control 80% of Haiti's capital and have left more than 580,000 people homeless across the country as they pillage neighborhoods in their quest to control more territory. Gangs also have killed several thousand people in recent years.

The Kenyans' arrival marks the fourth major foreign military intervention in Haiti. While some Haitians welcome them, others view the force with caution, given that the previous intervention – the U.N.'s 2004-2017 peacekeeping mission – was marred by allegations of sexual assault and the introduction of cholera, which killed nearly 10,000 people.



Police from Kenya stand on the tarmac of the Toussaint Louverture International Airport after landing in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Tuesday, June 25, 2024. The first U.N.-backed contingent of foreign police arrived nearly two years after the Caribbean country requested help to quell a surge in gang violence. (AP Photo/Marckinson Pierre)

Romain Le Cour, senior expert at Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, urged the international community and government officials to share details, including the mission's rules of engagement and concept of operation.

"What is going to happen vis-a-vis the gangs," he said. "Is it a static mission? Is it a moving mission? All those details are still missing, and I think it's about time that there's actually transparency."

Hours after the Kenyans landed, Prime Minister Garry Conille thanked the East African country for its solidarity, noting that gangs have vandalized homes and hospitals and set libraries on fire, making Haiti "unlivable."



Journalists cover the arrival of a plane carrying police from Kenya at the Toussaint Louverture International Airport in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Tuesday, June 25, 2024. (AP Photo/Odelyn Joseph)



Police from Kenya stand at the Toussaint Louverture International Airport after landing in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Tuesday, June 25, 2024. (AP Photo/Marckinson Pierre)

“The country is going through very difficult times,” he said

at a news conference. “Enough is enough. … We’re going to start working little by little to retake the country.”

Conille said the Kenyans would be deployed in the next couple of days, but he did not provide details. He was accompanied by Monica Juma, Kenya’s former minister of foreign affairs who now serves as national security advisor to President William Ruto. She said the Kenyans will “serve as agents of peace, of stability, of hope.”

“We stand united in our commitment to support Haiti’s National Police to restore public order and security,” she said. “It is our hope that this will not become a permanent mission.”

The deployment comes nearly four months after gangs launched coordinated attacks, targeting key government infrastructure in Haiti’s capital and beyond. They seized control of more than two dozen police stations, fired on the main international airport and stormed Haiti’s two biggest prisons, releasing more than 4,000 inmates.



The plane carrying police from Kenya taxis after landing at the Toussaint Louverture International Airport in Port-au-

Prince, Haiti, Tuesday, June 25, 2024. (AP Photo/Odelyn Joseph)



Police from Kenya stand at the Toussaint Louverture International Airport after landing in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Tuesday, June 25, 2024. (AP Photo/Marckinson Pierre)

“We’ve been asking for security for the longest time,” said Orgline Bossicot, a 47-year-old mother of two who sells carrots and charcoal as a wholesale distributor.

Gang violence has stymied her sales, and she tries to stay out as late as possible before sundown to make up for the losses despite being afraid.

“You don’t know who’s waiting for you around the corner,” she said, adding that she is hopeful about the Kenyan police joining forces with local authorities.

Critics say the gang attacks that began Feb. 29 could have been prevented if the foreign force had been deployed sooner, but multiple setbacks — including a legal challenge filed in Kenya and political upheaval in Haiti — delayed its arrival.



Police from Kenya enter a bus after landing at the Toussaint Louverture International Airport in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Tuesday, June 25, 2024. (AP Photo/Marckinson Pierre)

The attacks prevented then-Prime Minister Ariel Heny, who at the time was in Kenya to push for the deployment, from returning to Haiti. He resigned in late April as the violence surged. Afterward, a nine-member transitional presidential council chose former U.N. official Conille as prime minister and appointed a new Cabinet in mid-June.

Still, the gang violence has persisted, and experts say it will continue unless the government also addresses socioeconomic factors that fuel the existence of gangs in a deeply impoverished country with a severely understaffed and under-resourced police department.

Le Cour said the reaction of the gangs to the mission is difficult to predict. “Some of them might fight. Some of them might want to negotiate and open dialogue with the Haitian government,” he said.

In a recent video, Jimmy Chérizier, a former elite police officer who now leads a powerful gang federation known as G9

Family and Allies, addressed the new prime minister for the first time.

“Do not play into the hands of traditional politicians and businessmen, who used violence for political and economic ends,” said Chérizier, best known as Barbecue. “The problem that exists today can only be resolved through dialogue.”



Police from Kenya deplane at the Toussaint Louverture International Airport in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Tuesday, June 25, 2024. (AP Photo/Odelyn Joseph)

When asked about Barbecue’s comments on Tuesday, Conille responded with a message of his own: “Put down the guns and recognize the authority of the state, and then we will see where we go from there.”

The U.N. Security Council authorized Kenya to lead the multinational police mission in October 2023, a year after Henry first requested immediate help.

President Joe Biden praised the arrival of the first contingent, saying that the mission overall “will bring much needed relief.”

“The people of Haiti deserve to feel safe in their homes, build better lives for their families, and enjoy democratic freedoms,” he said. “While these goals may not be accomplished overnight, this mission provides the best chance of achieving them.”

Rights groups and others have questioned the use Kenyan police, pointing out the years of allegations against officers of abuses, including extrajudicial killings. On Tuesday, police again were accused of opening fire in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi, where thousands of protesters stormed the parliament.



Police from Kenya stand at the Toussaint Louverture International Airport after landing in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Tuesday, June 25, 2024. (AP Photo/Marckinson Pierre)

Kenyan police in Haiti will be joined by police from the Bahamas, Bangladesh, Barbados, Benin, Chad and Jamaica for a total of 2,500 officers. They will be deployed in phases at a cost of some $600 million a year, according to the U.N. Security Council.

So far, the U.N.-administered fund for the mission has

received only $18 million in contributions from Canada, France and the United States. The U.S. also has pledged a total of $300 million in support.

“While gang violence appears to have receded from its peak earlier this year, the country’s security situation remains dire,” the U.N. Security Council said in a June 21 statement.

More than 2,500 people were killed or injured in the first three months of this year, a more than 50% increase from the same period last year.

Many Haitians live in fear, including Jannette Oville, a 54-year-old mother of two university-age boys. She sells crops like plantains and green peppers, and gangs have robbed her several times as she travels aboard public buses with her goods. She tucks money in her armpit or underwear to try to keep it safe, she said.

“I need security. I need to work. I need the roads to open up so I can provide for my family,” she said. “Being a female entrepreneur in Haiti is never easy. There’s a lot of risk. But we take a risk to make sure our families are good.”

An estimated 1.6 million Haitians are on the brink of starvation, the highest number recorded since the devastating 2010 earthquake, according to the U.N.

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