

OPINION

# The world needs to let Haiti write its own story

The history of Haiti is a cautionary tale about the damage wrought by colonialism and foreign intervention. Will the West heed what Haitians are saying, amid yet more crises and yet more calls from the international community for countries like Canada to get involved?

**GREG BECKETT**

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED 1 HOUR AGO



Haitians carry a mock coffin, bearing U.S. French and Canadian flags and a photo of Prime Minister Ariel Henry, at a protest in Port-au-Prince on Oct. 17. This is the date when Haitians honour Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the first ruler of an independent Haiti.

RICHARD PIERRIN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

*Greg Beckett is an associate professor of anthropology at Western University. He is the author of There Is No More Haiti: Between Life and Death in Port-au-Prince and the co-editor of Trouillot Remixed: The Michel-Rolph Trouillot Reader.*

*Dèyè mòn, gen mòn, goes the Haitian Creole proverb: Beyond the mountains, there are more mountains. It's an apt description of the country's rugged terrain, but it is*

also a ready metaphor to describe the too-common feeling in Haiti that after one hardship, another is always looming in the distance.

For many Haitians, though, that's no longer just a euphemism.

When people come to the capital city of Port-au-Prince in search of work, they say they are going to *chache lavi* – to look for life. But these days, to do so, they have to travel through the treacherous mountains just to safely get to the city, because armed gangs now control large parts of the capital and most of Haiti's critical infrastructure and roads. And when they do arrive, they find a city in upheaval.

Haiti has already long had some of the lowest rates of access to electrical energy and some of the highest overall energy costs in the Caribbean region, but since at least 2018, when the government proposed nearly doubling the prices of gasoline, diesel and kerosene, fuel has become a protracted source of unrest. Increasingly chronic shortages have led to frequent blackouts and gas rationing across the country, as well as repeated closings of schools, businesses and hospitals. In September, a coalition of gangs known as the G9 even took over Haiti's main port and largest fuel terminal, demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Ariel Henry and financial relief for Haitians; this blockade ended in early November, but there is still a profound shortage. And amid historically high levels of inflation, Haitian economist Patrick Alexis has suggested its economy is on the verge of collapse.

But the fuel crisis and the rise of armed gangs are just two of a series of crises that have now cascaded into a humanitarian emergency. These include the assassination of the country's president, Jovenel Moïse, in his own home in July, 2021; an earthquake in southern Haiti in August, 2021, a grim reminder of the 2010 disaster that still haunts the country; a new cholera outbreak, three years after the last confirmed case in a terrible epidemic that has killed thousands; the internal displacement of about 100,000 people who fear the surge in gang violence and the increasingly acute food insecurity; and the mass refusals of Haitians who have fled this life at the U.S.-Mexico border and deportations from the neighbouring Dominican Republic.

Incredibly, this is only a partial list. For Haitians, life has become invivab, unlivable; like the mountains themselves, things seem immovable.

The current government, headed by Mr. Henry, has asked the international community to send a “specialized armed force” to address the security situation – even though critics say that his government has no authority and no mandate, given that Mr. Moïse had dissolved the legislature before he died, and Mr. Henry replaced him without an election or legislative confirmation. This call for intervention is a familiar one for many Haitians: The country was occupied by the United States from 1915 to 1934, and over the past three decades, there have only been a handful of years in which there wasn't some kind of United Nations presence in the country. Once

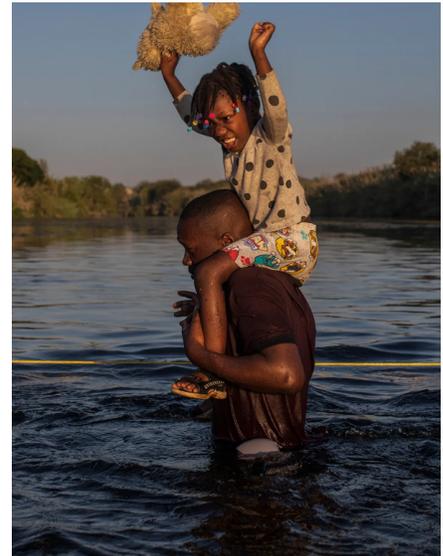
again, Haitians have heard the usual aspersions that they live in a “failed state”: Only hours after Mr. Moïse's



assassination, The Washington Post’s editorial board suggested Haiti’s instability required a “swift and muscular intervention,” and such calls have only gotten louder. Countries, including the U.S., have probed if Canada – which has provided aid and troop support to UN interventions for more than two decades – would lead a military mission there.

Yet despite the deprivations, many Haitians do not want an intervention. Speaking to the U.S. House foreign affairs committee about the situation, Velina E. Charlier, a member of the civil-society group Nou Pap Domi, called for a Haitian-led solution to the crisis: “We do not ask for intervention,” she said, “but rather the *end* of ongoing intervention.”

Intervention has been the norm for decades in Haiti, and yet each wave has left behind destruction, damage and, in at least one case, deadly disease. As the international community once again considers what to do about Haiti, the debate carries the weight of a shared history between it and the Western world that has too often been ignored, and a growing belief among Haitians that such missions only benefit the ruling classes, which cannot hold legitimate power through democratic means. That debate must now also carry the voices of the many Haitians demanding a different approach.



A girl holds her stuffed animal high above the water as migrants, many from Haiti, cross the Rio Grande from Del Rio, Texas, to return to Mexico in the fall of 2021.

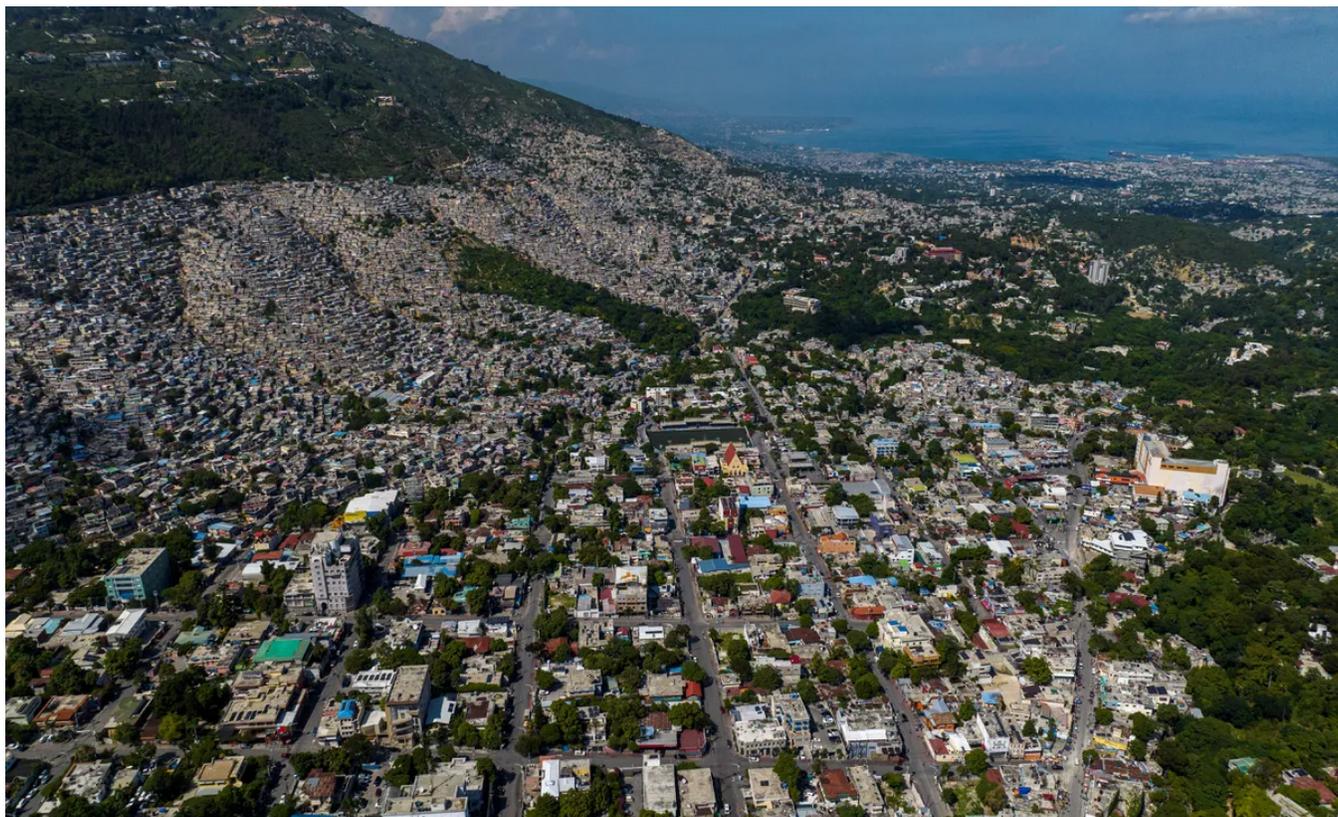
FELIX MARQUEZ/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



At protests this past October, a man holds a sign reading ‘down with the American occupation’ in Haitian Creole. At the Canadian embassy, some wave the flag of Russia, which some protesters have adopted as a symbol of defiance to western countries that might intervene in their country.

RICARDO ARDUENGO/REUTERS; RICHARD PIERRIN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES





The Jalousie and Petion-Ville areas of Port-au-Prince. During the current political crisis, gangs have seized control of some neighbourhoods of the Haitian capital.

RICARDO ARDUENGO/REUTERS



Mr. Henry, shown this past July, has had a rocky tenure ever since he came to power in the chaos after the assassination of president Jovenel Moïse, whose portrait is shown at a memorial in Cap-Haitien in July of 2021.

ODELYN JOSEPH/AP; RICARDO ARDUENGO/REUTERS

The island we now call Hispaniola was once known as Ayiti – the Arawak word for “land of the high mountains” – by the indigenous Taino population who lived there. It was Christopher Columbus who renamed it La Isla Espanola when his flagship, the Santa Maria, ran aground off its north coast in 1492. There, he created the first European settlement, La Navidad, to “subjugate all this island” in what is now

northern Haiti. When he returned a year later, the dissolute settlers he left behind had been killed, but Columbus's second journey launched an era of European conquest and colonization that would go on to transform much of the world.

By the early 17th century, France had joined Spain in colonizing the island, building a settlement it called Saint-Domingue in the west. In 1697, France and Spain signed a treaty granting the former control over the western third of the island, and in less than a century, Saint-Domingue became the most profitable colony in the Americas, producing sugar and coffee for Europeans using vast numbers of people stolen from Africa to work on plantations.

French sugar plantations were notorious for their extremity. The average life expectancy of slaves born in Saint-Domingue was 21 years; for the tens of thousands forcibly brought to the colony every year, it was just three.

Amid this cruelty, though, something incredible happened. Slaves, who were often separated by language and area of origin, created a whole new world, with its own language (Haitian Creole), its own religion (Vodou), and its own systems of cultural and social meaning.

This emergence of new cultures out of a context that was dehumanizing and destructive by design is nothing short of a miracle. Some slaves found ways to grow their own food on the margins of the plantations, to buy and sell goods, and to fashion a sense of self through creative acts of agency.

Survival in the colony was a political act. But in Saint-Domingue, slaves also sought to build a world of their own.





A mural in Archaie, Haiti, celebrates the heroes of independence ahead of Flag Day in 2018. Haiti's enslaved population revolted against the French empire in the late 18th century. Seamstress Catherine Flon is said to have sewn the first Haitian flag in 1803 from pieces of the French tricolour.

DIEU NALIO CHERY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

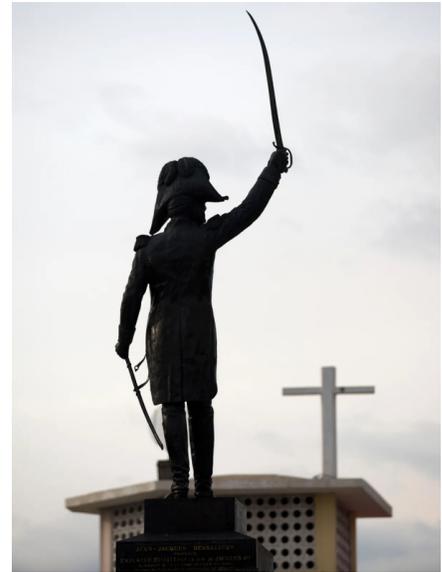
On the evening of Aug. 14, 1791, a group of slaves from plantations across Saint-Domingue met and planned an uprising. A week later, they set fire to the sugar cane fields and started what would come to be known as the Haitian Revolution – the only successful slave revolution of the modern era.

The uprisings shut down plantation production and left the colony in turmoil, prompting France to abolish slavery in Saint-Domingue two years later. But after Napoleon Bonaparte came to power in 1799, the prospect of the restoration of slavery in the colonies returned. In Saint-Domingue, Toussaint Louverture, who had been born into slavery, drafted a new constitution in 1801 that aimed to both abolish slavery forever in the colony and to keep the island part of the French empire. Worried about Louverture's influence, Napoleon sent his brother-in-law, General Charles Leclerc, to the island, along with 30,000 troops and secret orders to arrest Louverture, defeat the remaining revolutionaries, and restore slavery. On June 7, Louverture was captured, and he died the following year in the Fort-de-Joux prison.

But the arrest only sparked a new round of uprisings. General Jean-Jacques Dessalines became leader of the newly named Indigenous Army. By November, 1803,

the former slaves had successfully defeated the French forces; on Jan. 1, 1804, Dessalines declared independence for the Republic of Haiti.

As the Caribbean historian C.L.R. James put it, what happened in Saint-Domingue is “one of those pages in history which every schoolboy should learn, and most certainly will learn, some day.” Yet, few outside of Haiti do. Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck describes his homeland as a “country forcefully overlooked in its role in changing Western world history.” The late Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot described this as the “silencing” of Haiti – a stifling that occurred, he argued, because Westerners could not accept the fact that people who had been enslaved could resist and declare themselves to be free. “Can historical narratives convey plots that are unthinkable in the world within which these narratives take place?” Dr. Trouillot asked. “How does one write a history of the impossible?”



A statue of Dessalines stands in Arcahaie.  
DIEU NALIO CHERY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The story of postrevolution Haiti has been silenced, too. When Dessalines declared independence, Haiti became the second free republic in the Americas, and the only country in the region to have abolished slavery. But the country’s very existence was a threat to the economic order of the slave-plantation societies that surrounded it, and so Haiti was marginalized on the world stage for decades. Even the United States – which was recognized by most of the major powers within a decade of declaring its independence in 1776 – waited until 1862 to recognize Haiti.

This exclusion had real consequences. Trade was difficult, especially since the colony’s economy had been built on producing goods for export overseas. The threat of a new military invasion from France remained potent, too, prompting Haitian governments to spend much of their national budget on fortifications. Indeed, France continued to call Haiti by its colonial name, and in 1825, French warships armed with cannons arrived in the Port-au-Prince harbour, demanding that Haiti compensate France for the loss of its “property” – including slaves. Under duress, Haitian president Jean-Pierre Boyer agreed to pay an enormous indemnity of 150 million francs and to grant a painful 50-per-cent discount on French import duties in exchange for diplomatic recognition, forcing the republic to take on staggering levels of national debt (from French banks, of course). This may have been the first time postcolonial debt was used to maintain colonial dependency, and it set Haiti on a path to economic ruin. The New York Times referred to it as “the ransom.”





Roseline Ceus, 18, holds her daughter Phaniella as her son Phanelson looks on. They are at a UNICEF-sponsored hospital in Port-au-Prince to be treated for cholera, after it broke out again in Haiti this past October.

RICARDO ARDUENGO/REUTERS



Vendors sell produce at a street market in Petion-Ville. Food insecurity has been one of the harmful effects of the recent unrest.

RICARDO ARDUENGO/REUTERS



Drivers wait at a gas station in Port-au-Prince this past November, after police broke a gang blockade that hobbled fuel imports.

RALPH TEDY EROL/REUTERS

Isolation and debt to France are only part of the story, however. In 1915, after unrest following the assassination of Haitian president Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, U.S.

president Woodrow Wilson ordered an invasion of Haiti. At the time, the U.S. government was committed to upholding its Monroe Doctrine, a foreign policy that

claimed the Caribbean and Latin America as “America’s backyard” and sought to remove European economic and political control from the region. In some corners, U.S. invasions in the region were cast as acts of liberation, freeing countries from European colonial rule – but that fiction could never hold in postrevolution Haiti.

Perhaps that explains why U.S. forces encountered stiff resistance there, leading them to spend the first six years of the occupation patrolling the countryside and fighting against armed insurgents. Historians are still documenting the extent of the violence, but oral histories and other accounts suggest at least 15,000 Haitians were killed. Many others fled the country for Cuba and the Dominican Republic.

Over the course of the 19-year occupation, the U.S. occupiers wrote a new constitution for the country that opened it up to foreign landowners, created new sugar plantations, trained a new army (which would later be used by dictator François Duvalier’s government to crush opposition and terrorize the populace), and transferred the indemnity debt from France to what is now Citibank. Since then, Haiti has been politically and economically dependent on the U.S., while it has repeatedly treated Haiti as a site for low-wage and mobile migrant labour. Because of this, Haiti has become, by some measures, the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, forcing many Haitians to pursue low-paying wage work in textile factories in Port-au-Prince or take the risky journey overseas.

These policies have not just made Haiti poor; they have also brought political instability, which is then used repeatedly to justify interventions. For example, in early 2004, the country was yet again described as a failed state, after an armed coup that ousted the democratically elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and a new organization called the Core Group was created to oversee the international response. That group, which includes representatives from the United Nations, the European Union and the Organization of American States, as well as ambassadors from Canada, France, the U.S., Brazil, Spain and Germany, has since had outsized influence on Haitian politics; most recently, it backed Mr. Henry as Prime Minister.

Then, just months after the bicentennial of Haiti’s independence, came the 2004 UN mission, known in Haiti by its acronym MINUSTAH. One of its goals was to bolster the national police and to combat violence from armed gangs, some of which were aligned with various political parties and engaged in kidnapping, robbery, violence, and control over key areas of the capital. The UN claimed early success on this front, in part through joint military-police operations that reminded many of how U.S. marines patrolled with the then-new Haitian army during the American occupation. The label “gang” was used freely during this period for any group suspected of criminal activity or of violence, and critics have accused MINUSTAH of being involved in deadly raids against poor neighbourhoods and supporters of Mr. Aristide as a result of this overly broad description. UN soldiers have also been



In 2007, a Brazilian United Nations soldier gives water to a suspected gang member in Port-au-Prince.

KENA BETANCUR/REUTERS

accused of rape, sexual abuse, violence, and planning a raid that led to extrajudicial killings.

But perhaps the starkest example of the damage wrought by intervention is the cholera epidemic that began in 2010. The disease had not existed in Haiti for more than a century, but nine months after aid workers arrived in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, rates of the infectious waterborne disease exploded, leading to nearly a million cases and killing more than 10,000 people over the next decade. Experts later determined that the source of the outbreak was a United Nations peacekeeping camp; it took six years of denials before the UN accepted that it played at least some role in it.

For more than two centuries, Haiti has been caught up in cycles of debt and dependency and isolation and intervention. As Haitian sociologist Alex Dupuy notes, this pattern has left Haiti politically constrained by the interests or actions of foreign governments and international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The legacies of the French indemnity are a case in point: It wasn't just "colonial theft" that led to Haiti's underdevelopment, as Yale University professor of French and African diaspora studies Marlene Daut calls it, but a "legacy of slavery and the unquantifiable generational trauma wrought by France's material and moral war against Haitian independence." That's why the question of foreign intervention is always met with resistance in Haiti: Any new wave of engagement seems like part of a centuries-long attack on the country's autonomy. It feels like an invasion, not an intervention.

Yet, if not intervention, what can be done to help Haiti?



A man holds a skull and seashell at a protest against Mr. Henry's government on Oct. 17.

RICHARD PIERRIN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

I've been conducting research in the poor neighbourhoods of Port-au-Prince for 20 years, and I don't think things have ever been as bad as they are now – not even after the earthquake of 2010, which was one of the deadliest disasters in modern history. But I've also never seen the kind of collective organizing that is now taking place in Haiti.

A diverse group of civil-society organizations and social movements has been protesting government corruption in Haiti since 2018, after the release of a series of reports detailing the misuse of billions of dollars in aid and reconstruction funds. Jovenel Moïse himself had been implicated in the corruption scandal before his assassination, as have many others in the ruling Parti Haitien Tet Kale regime – the political party to which Mr. Henry and Mr. Moïse belong, and which was founded by former president Michel Martelly in 2010. Mr. Martelly, who has alleged ties to the country's oligarchs and drug traffickers, was among those recently targeted for sanctions from Canada – for “profiting from the violence that is being weaponized by gangs in Haiti,” according to Canadian Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly – a clear sign to those in power that the political winds are shifting.

It is also telling that Mr. Henry's request for foreign intervention to prop up his government has mostly gone unanswered. Few countries seem to want to wade into what will surely be a logistical and humanitarian mess. Washington has looked for takers – first the UN Security Council, then Canada – but so far, none are interested.

Instead, Ottawa expanded its list of sanctions, and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said that Canada would only intervene if there was a “Haitian consensus.”

That said, Mr. Trudeau has not ruled intervention out: “We look at the crisis, rapes, the violence, the poverty and the cholera and health crisis. And then we say to ourselves, we have to intervene in one way or another,” he said in early November. The government has since sent a diplomatic team to see how Canada can help.

Much more could be done to support Haiti. The Core Group could pull support from Mr. Henry and his government, which is seen as illegitimate. And the international community should back the consensus-driven civil-society proposal known as the Montana Accord, which lays out a plan for a two-year power-sharing transitional government that can oversee a new round of elections and begin to address the numerous claims of human-rights violations by Mr. Moïse’s and Mr. Henry’s governments. The plan has broad national support from most political and civil-society groups, but the PHTK and business leaders – the two groups who benefit most from the current crisis – are opposed to it.

The only durable solution to the current crisis in Haiti is a political one. The presence of foreign forces might ease the most immediate humanitarian and security issues, but it cannot address the underlying problems. And if the past is prologue, any new intervention will have the same problems. This is not just about respecting territorial sovereignty; it is also about recognizing Haiti on its own terms – as Haitians want to be recognized.

While there are many problems in the country today, we should be wary of old narratives that too often cast the country itself as a problem to be solved. If Haitian history has been a long “experiment in neocolonial rule,” as Dr. Trouillot put it, then now is the time to break with the old ways and stand in solidarity with Haiti. There are many challenges ahead – but we don’t necessarily have to move mountains to overcome them. If the international community can support a Haitian-led solution, we can find a path to the clearing.

## Haiti: More from The Globe and Mail

### HAITI AND CANADA

**Haitian political parties must all agree to Canadian military intervention, says Trudeau**

**RCMP charges Quebec man with planning a terrorist act to overthrow the Haitian government**

**Former Haitian PM sanctioned by Canada denies wrongdoing, says Ottawa provided no evidence**



DIEU NALIO CHERY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

### COMMENTARY

**Campbell Clark: Canada could not mount a whole Haiti mission even if it wanted to**

**Michaëlle Jean: As Haiti descended into tragedy, the international community ignored its cries**

**Robert Rotberg: The only way to save Haiti is to put it under UN control**

### **Sign up for the Opinion Newsletter**

Keep your opinions sharp and informed with a helpful summary of The Globe's most provocative columns, covering politics, world affairs, business, arts, health and the way we live.

**REGISTER TO SIGN UP**