

Violent Haitian protests triggered by IMF austerity measures

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A general strike paralyzed the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince Monday, following three days of violent demonstrations, looting and clashes with security forces triggered by drastic hikes in fuel prices. Taxi and mini-bus drivers shut down operations and businesses and stores closed down, while scattered protests and barricades continued, with demonstrators calling for the ouster of the government of President Jovenel Moïse.

On Friday the government of Haiti attempted to drastically cut fuel subsidies, a move it had promised the International Monetary Fund in February. An IMF mission in June to follow up on the “Staff-Level Agreement” it was imposing concluded with a statement that “the mission welcomes the government’s intention to eliminate fuel price subsidies.”

The subsidy cuts would have caused a 38 percent jump in the price of a liter of gas, to more than 300 gourdes. The minimum wage for textile workers in Port-au-Prince is less than 400 gourdes per day, despite a strike last summer demanding a salary increase.

The IMF’s June statement claimed that annual inflation of less than 15 percent in Haiti is a “positive” sign, but that is cold comfort in a country where inflation is 12.7 percent per year and driven by price hikes in basic food commodities.

The subsidy cuts would also add 85 gourdes to the price of a liter of diesel—a jump of nearly 50 percent—and 89 gourdes to the price of kerosene, raising a liter to 262 gourdes.

In addition to the pressure from the IMF, the Haitian government claimed that the price hikes are necessary because it loses money when drivers from the Dominican Republic cross the border to take advantage of cheaper prices.

The reaction in the streets of Haiti was both swift and violent. A member of the Haitian National Police was killed in the Delmas 83 neighborhood outside of Port-au-

Prince, although *Alterpresse* reported that the police presence in the streets of the capital was “timid.” A police station in the Artibonite region was set on fire, as were a courthouse and government tax offices in Petit-Goâve.

Haitilibre reported that a Coca Cola plant was set on fire, and that driving in the capital was impossible because of barricades. Supermarkets were looted and, according to *Alterpresse*, numerous people were unable to obtain food and water between Friday afternoon and Saturday.

Two young men in Port-au-Prince died in the protests, and a security guard for the leader of an opposition political party was reportedly lynched and then burned.

Cap-Haïtien in the north, Jacmel in the southeast, and Les Cayes in the southwest also experienced violence. *Le Nouvelliste* reported that all public transportation and traffic in Les Cayes was stopped by flaming barricades.

On Saturday, American Airlines, Air France, Delta, JetBlue, and Spirit canceled all flights to Port-au-Prince. Coverage in the American press focused on two hotels in Port-au-Prince that were housing a mixture of wealthy visitors and Christian missionaries.

President Moïse publicly contradicted his Minister of Communication by stating that the national government would reimburse businesses that have been damaged.

Moïse is in a precarious position, despite having reinstated the army last year to aid the Haitian National Police in suppressing workers and despite having traveled the country in his “Caravan of Change” to announce the funding of infrastructure projects.

The handpicked successor to former president Michel Martelly, Moïse won the 2016 presidential election with less than 20 percent of eligible voters. Less than a year after his inauguration an audit of the country’s participation in the PetroCaribe exposed the no-bid contracts and outright looting that had occurred during Martelly’s administration of the program.

By Saturday night, the mass opposition to the subsidy cuts had forced Moïse to revoke them. In a national address, he stated that “you sent me the message and I received it.” While claiming that “the price of fuel is staying as it was before” and that “there is no longer an increase in the price of gas,” he nonetheless signaled to the IMF that he intends to continue imposing its demands. Moïse ended his speech by boasting that no fewer than 30 private companies are interested in producing electricity in Haiti, in keeping with the June IMF statement’s insistence that the government “ensure sustainable medium-term growth of the electricity sector and improve the environment for private investment.”

Prime Minister Jack Guy Lafontant surrounded himself with the heads of the national police on Saturday and gave a national address defending the subsidy cuts and begging the people for calm. He was quickly undercut by the president’s address and is now being treated as a scapegoat by influential parliamentary deputies. Pétion-Ville deputy Jerry Tardieu issued a statement on Sunday demanding that Lafontant resign immediately.

Last week, two days before the cuts in fuel subsidies, protests had already broken out in the Pétion-Ville neighborhood where Moïse is staying. The government, claiming to be removing illegal dwellings, has been evicting people in the middle of the night and destroying their homes. One woman told *Le Nouvelliste* that “they came with heavily armed police to demolish my house without warning.” Another resident pointed out the falsity of the government’s claim to be destroying precariously situated houses, given that the President’s house is next to a ravine.

The mass protests triggered by the fuel price hikes are the product of the immense buildup of social anger over conditions of poverty, inequality and oppression that prevail throughout Haiti.



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