

Haiti under state of siege after president's assassination

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Haiti's interim prime minister Claude Joseph declared a state of siege throughout the impoverished Caribbean country Wednesday after the early morning assassination of de facto President Jovenel Moïse.

Moïse was shot dead at 1 a.m. by a commando squad armed with military-grade assault rifles. His wife, severely wounded, was flown via air ambulance to a trauma center in Florida. According to witnesses and an audio recording of the raid, the members of the death squad spoke English and Spanish.

Sustained gunfire was preceded by one of the members of the squad shouting out in American southern-accented English, "DEA operation! Everybody back up, stand down!", an apparent ruse aimed at identifying the gunmen as members of the US Drug Enforcement Administration.

The US State Department issued a denial that the assassins were American agents.

While Moïse's black-clad killers have been widely described as "mercenaries," there were indications of a high level of sophistication in the attack, as well as of apparent support from within the Haitian regime. Witnesses reported that drones were seen flying above the home of the Haitian president during the raid and also heard the sound of a grenade.

Moïse's private residence, where the killing took place, is located in the wealthy Pelerin 5 district of Pétienville, an area of fortified villas in the hills above the capital, Port-au-Prince. The only road leading to and from it is routinely guarded by Haitian security forces. Militarized police only arrived on the scene after dawn, while the media had free access, photographing abandoned black balaclavas and spent shell casings on the ground.

The normally crowded streets of Port-au-Prince were deserted Wednesday as the population waited with dread for a response to the assassination. Justifiable fears range from a bloody state crackdown to an escalation of violence by armed gangs linked to the security forces or

even an armed intervention by the United States and other foreign powers.

With a population of 11 million, Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

"In line with article 149 of the Constitution, I have just chaired an extraordinary council of ministers and we have decided to declare a state of siege throughout the country," Joseph said during a speech broadcast on social media Wednesday. He added, "You can kill President Jovenel Moïse, but you cannot kill his ideas."

The pretense that the actions of Joseph have anything to do with the constitution is laughable. As for Moïse's "ideas," there is no indication that they consisted of anything beyond securing his own power and the interests of his imperialist patrons.

Joseph is attempting to succeed Moïse, who was himself regarded by the majority of the Haitian population as an illegitimate president, even as Washington, the other major imperialist powers and the Organization of American States continued to lend him support.

Moïse came into office as a result of fraudulent elections, the first round of which had to be nullified in 2015. He was installed through a second election the following year in which barely 23 percent of the electorate participated. Under Haiti's constitution, his five-year term ended in February, but he refused to step down, insisting on remaining in power for another year.

In the meantime, he sought to consolidate a presidential dictatorship. After the country failed to hold parliamentary elections, Moïse ruled by presidential decree for more than a year, with his appointments, including that of Joseph, never legitimately approved. On Monday, Moïse had announced that Joseph would be replaced as prime minister by Ariel Henry, a longtime US stooge, who would have been the sixth to hold the post since 2017. With the president's assassination, the line of succession is far from clear.

Moïse had also replaced local mayors with his own supporters and was preparing to ram through an illegal constitutional referendum aimed at further consolidating a presidential dictatorship and protecting presidents from prosecution for any crimes committed while they were in office.

Moïse was the hand-picked successor of Michel Martelly, a former singer known as “Sweet Micky,” who was installed as president as the result of direct intervention into the 2010-2011 Haitian elections by then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Martelly, like Moïse, had close political ties to former members of the US-backed Duvalier dictatorship, which ruled Haiti for three decades before “Baby Doc” Duvalier was toppled by a popular revolt in 1986. Both of them made it a political priority to refound the Haitian Armed Forces (FAD’H) which were disbanded in 1995.

While Martelly received the backing of the Clintons (Bill Clinton was then the UN special envoy to Haiti) as the man to lead the recovery from Haiti’s devastating 2010 earthquake, Moïse cast himself as the “Haitian Trump” based upon his equally suspect claims about success as a businessman. Both were supported by Washington because of their unconditional support for IMF-dictated policies that subordinated the interests of the Haitian masses to the drive by foreign capital for profits based upon sweatshops, agribusiness, mining and tourism.

Moïse confronted mass opposition in the streets since 2018, when his government suddenly announced a 50 percent hike in gas prices as part of an IMF “readjustment” program. Mass demonstrations continued as it emerged that some \$4 billion in oil import subsidies supplied by Venezuela under its Petrocaribe program, supposedly meant for Haitian development, had been pocketed by the government and its cronies. In the bargain, the corrupt Haitian government managed to solidify support from Washington by backing its regime-change operation against the government of President Nicolás Maduro.

Demonstrations erupted once again in February against Moïse’s refusal to step down after the end of his term and his assumption of increasingly dictatorial powers. Popular anger has only grown as the COVID-19 pandemic spreads through the impoverished country, without the government providing a single vaccination.

To the extent that demonstrations have waned, it is largely due to the government’s unleashing of violent repression, including by gangs linked to the police force, with opposition figures assassinated and inhabitants of

Port-au-Prince’s shantytowns massacred.

No doubt reflecting urgent discussions within the US state apparatus, the *Washington Post* quickly posted an editorial Wednesday warning that Haiti was on the brink “anarchy,” posing “an immediate humanitarian threat to millions of Haitians and an equally urgent diplomatic and security challenge to the United States and major international organizations.” The *Post* editorial board’s conclusion? “Swift and muscular intervention is needed.”

The *Post* continues: “To prevent a meltdown that could have dire consequences, the United States and other influential parties—including France, Canada and the Organization of American States—should push for an international peacekeeping force, probably organized by the United Nations, that could provide the security necessary for presidential and parliamentary elections to go forward this year, as planned.”

The *Post* is apparently suggesting a revival of the “blue helmets” of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), which conducted military operations in which hundreds of people were killed in various impoverished neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince between 2004 and 2017 under the command of Brazilian generals. The MINUSTAH deployment also triggered a cholera epidemic, the first in the country’s modern history, which claimed roughly 10,000 lives.

US President Joe Biden issued a statement Wednesday describing the assassination of Moïse as “heinous,” and declaring, “we stand ready to assist as we continue to work for a safe and secure Haiti.”

The last assassination of a Haitian head of state took place in 1915, when Jean Vilbrun Guillaume was captured and butchered after he himself had ordered the mass execution of his opponents. The day after his killing, US Democratic President Woodrow Wilson ordered the Marines to invade Haiti, where they stayed for nearly 20 years, ruthlessly suppressing a popular revolt.

The United Nations Security Council has scheduled a meeting on the situation in Haiti for today.



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