

Prisoners in Haiti's Les Cayes National Penitentiary being starved to death

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Shocking video footage released last week further exposed the torturous and inhumane conditions inmates face inside Haiti's National Penitentiaries and prisons and confirmed findings in United Nations reports. The horrific video leaked last week showed prisoners in Les Cayes, the largest city in the country's southwestern peninsula, who are being systematically subjected to forced starvation and dehydration.

The footage at the Les Cayes Penitentiary had been publicized in a tweet by HaitiInfoProj and received thousands of views in a few hours. The camera shows dozens of extremely malnourished and underfed detainees crowded together outside the prison facility, with prison authorities looking on and merely walking past.

The searing images of prisoners, a majority of whom have never been seen a trial for alleged crimes, forced to endure hunger is a testament to the repression and criminality of Haiti's ruling class and puppet regime led by President Ariel Henry, who do the bidding of the imperialist powers operating in Haiti.

Many of the bodies of those captured on camera carry a skeleton appearance, with the camera panning around to scores of prisoners clearly wasting away from food deprivation. At the beginning of the two-minute clip a detainee can be seen nearly unconscious on the floor and barely able to move, with two other prisoners struggling to help him stay upright.

A report last week revealed that at least eight inmates have starved to death recently at the overcrowded prison, which currently houses 833 prisoners.

According to Ronald Richemond, the city's government commissioner, hunger and scorching heat contributed to the inmates' deaths in Les Cayes. The deaths resulted from the prison running out of food two months ago, adding to dozens of similar deaths this year inside the country's dilapidated and crumbling prison system. The food crisis is the result of soaring inflation and that has caused food insecurity to skyrocket throughout the nation.

The United Nations Security Council released a report last

week that found 54 prison deaths related to malnutrition in Haiti between January and April alone of this year.

By law, prisons in Haiti are required to provide inmates with water and two meals a day, which itself consists of an insufficient amount of porridge and a bowl of rice with fish or some type of meat. In recent months, however, inmates have been forced to rely solely on friends or family for food and water. Often, prisoners are unable to receive visitors because of gang-related violence throughout the major cities.

The cell occupancy rate in Haiti stands at a staggering 280 percent of capacity, with 83 percent of inmates lodged in pretrial detentions that in some cases drag on for more than a decade before an initial court appearance is scheduled. Many prisoners are forced to take turns sleeping on the floor while others stand or try to make hammocks and attach them to cell windows, paying someone to keep their place.

Moreover, Les Cayes and other cities in Haiti's southern region have been affected by the spike in gang violence that has blocked the main roads leading out of Haiti's capital, making it almost impossible to distribute food and other supplies to the rest of the country, according to Pierre Espérance, the executive director of Haiti's National Human Rights Defense Network.

The harrowing footage from Les Cayes recalls the images of survivors rescued from the Nazi extermination camps at the end of World War II, as food rations had been deliberately lowered in the four years prior and a wave of death through starvation was set in motion. In fact, Haiti's prison network has for years been documented as a bastion of political reaction and brutality meted out against the country's most vulnerable and destitute.

In a report published in 2021 by the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH) and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, testimony from over 800 prisoners in twelve detention facilities documented the hellish conditions inmates face inside Haiti's prisons. Spanning from January to March 2021, interviews from prisoners and first-hand observations exposed how most

detainees live in overcrowded, poorly lit cells without proper ventilation, clean water or sanitation facilities. Prisoners are forced to urinate and defecate in buckets that are not regularly emptied and only receive one daily ration of food while having limited or no access to health care.

Under mounting pressure and outrage following the release of the leaked video, the BINUH felt compelled to make a perfunctory statement on Twitter feigning concern for the unfed prisoners and to evade criticisms over its own complicity in overseeing mass starvation. The BINUH account noted that the organization was “very concerned” about the “increase in deaths in Haitian prisons in recent months particularly in the prison of Les Cayes where inmates died of hunger, thirst and suffocation.”

The US-led BINUH was established on June 25, 2019 by the UN Security Council. In a resolution developed at the council meeting, the BINUH was given a mandate with two proposals focusing on “advising the Government of Haiti in promoting and strengthening political stability and good governance,” which includes “protecting and promoting human rights” and, secondly, assisting Haiti’s government with efforts at “dialogue and reforms,” elections, “police professionalism,” and reducing gang violence.

But three years after the UN resolution took effect with promises to “improve the lives of the Haitian people,” the agency’s tenure has seen the most appalling attacks against democratic rights and the breakdown of Haiti’s judicial procedures, worsened by the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in the summer of 2020 which left the country in shambles.

Mechanisms to protect prisoners from such horrendous conditions have either been almost entirely abandoned or not pursued at all. Although tasked with monitoring Haiti’s prisons, officials from the Haitian Prison Administration have proven incapable of visiting prisons regularly due to scarce resources. A so-called “special office” opened in 2018 tasked with inspecting prisons has not carried out any visits. Furthermore, there is no formal mechanism for detainees to report abuses to the General Inspectorate of the National Police.

In March 2021, the UN Security Council called on Haitian authorities to end the practice of prolonged pretrial detention but not one of the UN’s hollow resolutions has been taken seriously while the billions of dollars of investments that have poured into the country from the international agency have not gone to reforming Haiti’s “justice system” or providing food and water to inmates in overcrowded prisons but to beefing up Haiti’s violent and gang-affiliated police apparatus.

A new criminal code and procedure inaugurated by a presidential decree in 2020 and slated to be put in practice

by June 2022 was touted as a new mechanism to pursue policies for the implementation of pretrial detention and establish detention of children as a measure of last resort. But the procedural code has yet to be enforced, while the proper legal or judicial infrastructures even needed for its enforcement remain absent because of the total collapse of Haiti’s parliament due to the expiration of legislators’ terms.

The abysmal conditions in Haiti’s prisons predate the COVID-19 pandemic and blatantly violate the UN’s own Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment outlined in its human rights charter. In scapegoating Haiti’s corrupt National Police and haphazard regulating agencies, UN officials seek to cover up the fact that all institutions responsible for turning Haiti’s prisons into veritable concentration camps are under UN oversight.

In contradiction to the BINUH’s claim of adopting a “national strategy to reduce gang and community violence,” mountains of evidence have emerged linking the same UN-supervised state officials and authorities under Haiti’s national police to the warring gangs. A report by the Harvard Law School in May 2021 along with a Haitian crime observatory confirmed allegations that state officials and police had been assisting in gang attacks that left hundreds of people dead, exposing how the government has helped to unleash criminal violence on the nation’s working class and poor.

The most notorious of the attacks occurred between May and July 2020, when gangs stormed the commune of Cité Soleil, killing at least 145 people. The gangs involved in the attack were all part of the G9 an Fanmi (G9 and Family), an alliance brokered among at least nine gangs in Port-au-Prince who continue to unleash havoc on the city’s civilians. Two armored vehicles belonging to the National Police “passed through an area under G9 attack and shot at passersby in the direction of homes,” killing at least five civilians in early July of 2020, the report stated.

The headmaster of the gang federation is Jimmy “Barbecue” Chérisier, a former police officer who has a history of involvement in extrajudicial killings and deep ties to the corrupt Moïse regime and various state operatives of Haitian Tèt Kale Party, which is now currently led by Moïse’s successor Henry.



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