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

Alex Johnson
4 July 2022

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
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” Chérizier, 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 Têt Kale Party, which is now currently led by Moïse’s successor Henry.