The imperialist-backed Salvadoran intervention in Haiti: The securing of an open air prison

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On November 18—the 223rd anniversary of the Battle of Vertières, the final engagement of Haiti's war of independence—the residence of Viv Ansanm gang leader Jeff Larose in the north of Port-au-Prince was destroyed by helicopter fire as part of a US imperialist-sponsored "pacification" campaign.

The strike was ordered by El Salvador, whose military presence on the island has quickly increased over the past month. Led by Washington, the imperialist powers, which have devastated Haitian society for more than a century, have orchestrated the deployment of Salvadoran troops. They are touting their violence and repression as the only means to disarm the criminal gangs plaguing the impoverished country.

El Salvador's far-right president Nayib Bukele, speaking as a close ally of the United States, announced the strike as his "gift to the Haitian people." It came the same day the cabinet of Haiti's unelected, imperialist-installed government ratified a cooperation agreement with El Salvador, and was accompanied by rallies and mass demonstrations, sponsored by far-right elements in Haiti (or its diaspora) welcoming the Salvadoran authoritarian leader's ruthless methods.

The pretext for the escalation of Bukele's military operation in Haiti was the still unexplained disappearance of four Salvadoran aviation technicians attached to the United Nations (UN) Gang Suppression Force (GSF) last month. Some 1,000 Salvadoran troops were in the country by 27 October, and a US C-130 military transport aircraft was provided by the United States for their deployment. On that occasion, U.S. president Trump told Bukele, "You have to do what you have to do." By early November more than 2,000 Salvadoran troops were deployed to the Haitian half of the island of Hispaniola.

In line with its history of sponsoring far-right and fascist dictatorships throughout the 20th century in the region, Washington has cultivated a close patron-client partnership with the fascist regime in El Salvador to enforce its interests in Central America and the Caribbean. Its alliance with the "world's coolest dictator," as Bukele describes himself, allows U.S. imperialism to wage a dirty war in the Caribbean without the political cost of sending US troops.

Bukele has ruled under a "state of exception" (martial law) since March 2022, jailing more than 90,000 people without due process. Hundreds have died in custody. He also rented out his CECOT mega-prison to the Trump administration as a torture site for deported immigrants. Now his military is being used as a hired proxy force, working alongside the mercenary army of Blackwater founder Erik Prince.

UN spokesman Stéphane Dujarric stated that the vast majority of the Salvadoran intervention force "fall[s] outside" the GSF mandate and termed the deployment "a bilateral matter". The bilateral agreement remains unpublished, and will not be revealed "until diplomatic conditions allow," according to Salvadoran Vice President Felix Ulloa. So far, the Salvadoran force has retaken several sites in Port-au-Prince, including the Sylvio-Cator stadium, the EDH offices and the Portail Léogâne sub-station.

Haiti has been wracked by a protracted social and political crisis for decades, caused above all by brutal imperialist oppression, and repeated US imperialist military interventions and occupations stretching back more than a century. The imperialist powers' callous indifference to the plight of the Haitian people has compounded the island nation's social and economic crisis. What was already the poorest country in the Western hemisphere suffered a devastating earthquake in 2010, from which it has never recovered. Since 2019, the country has been effectively paralyzed and increasingly dominated by violent gangs that have close to various sections of the venal Haitian bourgeoisie.

Today, according to the World Food Program, 6.35 million people out of a population of 11.9 million are facing acute hunger, while 1.5 million have been forced to flee their homes.

Reports prior to the Salvadoran intervention estimated control of the capital by gangs at 90 percent. The UN counted 5,601 people killed in gang violence for all of 2024. In the first ten months of 2026, according to its count, a further 4,595 people have been killed and 2,050 injured in armed violence.

Haitians fleeing the country are faced with a dangerous and potentially deadly journey, closed borders, and persecution, and the very high likelihood they will be sent back to the deadly conditions they fled.

Haiti increasingly resembles an imperialist sponsored and guarded open air prison.

The rise of gang-rule grew out of the collapse of Haiti's economy and political system, the power vacuum left by a weak and parasitic Haitian bourgeoisie, and decades of imperialist occupation, dictatorship and coups. Haiti has not held a national election in ten years. The last one, in 2016, in which the US and Canada openly intervened to manipulate the result, brought Jovenel Moïse to power with barely one in five voters taking part.

The terms of the last elected legislators ran out in January 2023. Since Moïse was assassinated in July 2021, every head of government has been installed by bodies answerable to the main powers in the region, above all the United States, along with France and Canada. Ariel Henry, named prime minister by Moïse days before his murder, took office after the "Core Group" of foreign ambassadors publicly called on him to form a government. When Henry was forced out by Washington in 2024, the Transitional Presidential Council that replaced him was put together at a CARICOM meeting in Jamaica that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken attended.

In late January this year, members of that council tried to dismiss Prime Minister Alix Didier Fils-Aimé, a businessman. Washington responded by

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revoking visas, sanctioning council members and sending a warship to waters off Port-au-Prince. Since the council's mandate ended on February 7, Fils-Aimé has ruled alone as de facto head of state. The elections promised for December have now been put off until July 2027.

The gangs are not an alien force opposed to the Haitian state and ruling class, but have on the contrary grown out of both. For decades, sections of the political and business elite have armed and paid gangs to control neighborhoods, ports and roads, to deliver votes and to crush popular opposition. The G9 federation, led by former police officer Jimmy "Barbecue" Chérizier, emerged in 2020 under the Moïse government. In 2022, Canada sanctioned several of the country's richest businessmen, including Gilbert Bigio, for financing gangs. Former president Michel Martelly is under Canadian and European Union (EU) sanctions for financing armed groups and US sanctions for drug trafficking, and he has filed to run for president again.

The UN Panel of Experts' latest report, from September, accuses Guy Philippe—the former police commander who led the 2004 coup that Washington and Ottawa used to oust the country's "left" talking president Jean-Bertrand Aristide—of supporting the Viv Ansanm coalition. The report warned that "targeting gang leaders without tackling the networks that support them will inevitably be insufficient." In February, former Haitian National Police chief Rameau Normil was called before an investigating judge over 317 missing rifles and the sale of thousands of rounds of police ammunition to gangs.

US imperialism's region-wide alliance with the far right

The Salvadoran government now sent by the imperialist powers to the "rescue" is itself a client regime of the United States, distinguished by its proud embrace of fascistic forms of rule. In July 2026 Amnesty International stated that the mass detentions carried out by the Bukele regime under its "state of exception" could formally constitute a crime against humanity.

While the traditional discourse of the imperialist interventions, at least in recent decades, has included "democratic" and "humanitarian" verbiage, there is hardly even the pretense of a "humanitarian" intervention in Haiti at this point.

Bukele's regime is one of several far-right governments that Washington is cultivating across the hemisphere. Many have direct political and family ties to the dictatorships and death squads that US imperialism relied on across Latin America in an earlier period to uphold its predatory interests. In Peru, Keiko Fujimori was sworn in as president in July with the open backing of the Trump administration. She is the daughter and political heir of Alberto Fujimori. In Argentina, Washington set up a USD 20 billion currency swap line to rescue President Javier Milei before the October 2025 midterm elections. Milei, whose government has carried out savage attacks on the working class, all but openly celebrates the crimes of the 1976–1983 junta. In Chile, José Antonio Kast took office in March. He is the son of a member of Hitler's Nazi Party and the brother of a Pinochet-era minister and central bank president.

Trump's words to Bukele, "You have to do what you have to do," echo what Henry Kissinger told the Argentine junta's foreign minister in June 1976: "If there are things that have to be done, you should do them quickly."

Throughout the postwar period, US imperialism relied on military dictatorships and death squads to defend its corporate and strategic interests against any challenge from below.

In Haiti, US Marines occupied the country from 1915 to 1934, and the Duvaliers and their Tonton Macoute militia ruled it with US backing from 1957 to 1986. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti's first democratically elected president, was overthrown in a military coup in 1991 and removed again in 2004, when he was kidnapped and flown out of the country on a US plane.

The Bukele regime stands in this tradition, and functions as an instrument of US policy. El Salvador rented its CECOT mega-prison to Washington, and Human Rights Watch (HRW) has documented the torture and abuse of deportees held there. Venezuelans deported from the United States were told on arrival that they had "arrived in hell." According to HRW's analysis, more than 9,000 Salvadorans were deported from the United States between January 2025 and March 2026, and at that time, only 10.5 percent of them had a US conviction for a violent or potentially violent crime. Bukele's operation seeks to revive the tradition of death squads and imperialist-backed dictatorship to Haiti, in the service of imperialism.

Having plundered Haiti to the point of total impoverishment, sponsored an endless series of dictators and presided over one humanitarian disaster after another, the imperialist powers' main concern is now to install an authoritarian regime that can contain political and social unrest. Joe Biden, then a senator, put this outlook bluntly in 1994. If Haiti "just quietly sunk into the Caribbean," he said, "it wouldn't matter a whole lot in terms of our interests." The real problem was that allowing "a chaotic circumstance to exist that close to our shore" would affect Washington's "ability to generate consensus on much more important issues throughout Latin America."

Among the kinds of "disorder" that worry Washington most is Haitians' attempts to flee the conditions imperialism has created. The response has been to trap them inside the country and turn Haiti into an open-air prison.

Over recent years, the imperialist powers have opted to delegate "boots on the ground" interventions in Haiti to third country forces via the UN umbrella. This is partly to preserve and commit their resources elsewhere, like the Iran war and the growing confrontation with Russia and China, which is rapidly evolving into a global conflagration.

But there's also a keen awareness of the Haitian population's hostility to foreign intervention, especially the role of the US and Canada, and the prospect of a costly and bloody conflict with the gangs.

Far-right protests

To the extent that there were demonstrations in favor of Bukele last week, they were the product of a concerted right-wing campaign, taking advantage of despair and ignorance. The operation's domestic base is a section of the Haitian far right, nostalgic for the Duvalier era with its super-exploitation and law and order, and wanton disregard for the most elementary democratic rights. A frequently cited organizer was the New York-based journalist Thériel Thélus, a media personality whose anti-gang diatribes have stoked the "Bwa Kale vigilante movement," in which civilians are "slaughtering hundreds of suspected gang members with machetes, rocks, gasoline, and matches," as Rolling Stone documented (Rolling Stone, Dec. 2025). In 2023 Thélus ran a GoFundMe campaign that raised tens of thousands of dollars for an armored vehicle for "Muscadin," the prosecutor of Miragoâne, whom his partisans adulate as "Papa cheri," and whose units the UN alleges routinely execute people.

On 17 November, thousands marched across the capital and other cities. The capital march set off from Lalue, shouting "Bukele is here to free us!" One banner thanked Trump for backing Bukele.

While not opposed to the Bukele intervention, the UN has distanced itself from the forces sent by El Salvador, even if their initial point of

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departure was their delegation sent as part of the GSF. The establishment of a two-track approach, according to which the UN's GSF provides the pseudo-legal framework, but the US backed gangster regime provides the bodies and executes most of the violence on the ground outside the GSF, constitutes an agreeable division of the bloody labor for the interested imperialist powers.

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