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As UN Peacekeepers Depart, Talk of Reactivating Armed Forces Grows

by George Rodríguez

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The departure of UN peacekeepers after more than a decade of a controversial mission in Haiti leaves the country with the challenge of guaranteeing people's security with its police force, since Haiti disbanded its armed forces more than 20 years ago.

It is a cause of concern for neighboring Dominican Republic, whose authorities are worried about security along the 376-kilometer land border shared by the two nations that make up the Caribbean island of Hispaniola.

Known as the Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti (UN Mission for the Stabilization of Haiti, MINUSTAH), the peacekeepers are to leave Haiti by Oct. 15, six months after the UN Security Council voted to end their task and replace them with a smaller, police-only group. MINUSTAH has been in Haiti since 2004 ([NotiCen, Aug. 9, 2007](#), [Oct. 3, 2013](#), [May 11, 2017](#)).

The force's purpose was to keep the country stable after the last administration of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who held office during chaotic moments in the country's recent history (Feb. 7-Sept. 29, 1991; Oct. 12, 1994-Feb. 7, 1996; Feb. 4, 2001-Feb. 29, 2004). MINUSTAH was also tasked with improving the country's police force, the Police Nationale d'Haïti (PNH), a poorly trained, corruption-ridden outfit.

Cholera epidemic

The MINUSTAH force, which includes approximately 2,300 soldiers and 2,600 police officers, has been heavily criticized. It has been held responsible for triggering the ongoing cholera epidemic, first unleashed in 2010, which has infected around 7% of the country's population of 11 million, killing 10,000 ([NotiCen, March 28, 2013](#), and [Nov. 10, 2016](#)). MINUSTAH peacekeepers, known as "Blue Helmets" for their uniforms' headgear, have also been repeatedly accused of sexual abuse, including crimes such as rape, transactional sex, and kidnapping.

On April 11, two days before voting to end the mission, Sandra Honoré, the special UN secretary general representative for Haiti, presented a report to the UN Security Council. She said then that the Haitian police had "demonstrated increased capacity in the planning and execution of complex operations," among them "routine tasks in combating crime and more effectively maintaining public order."

Nevertheless, she acknowledged that "further development of the national police, including in the areas of internal management and oversight, the police-to-population ratio, and the geographic coverage" would have to occur to ensure its sustainability. That would require "international support, including from the UN," she added.

But local criticism of MINUSTAH points to stains in the task force's record.

If the UN “wants to support human rights, it can start by complying with the law and compensating the country and the victims,” Mario Joseph, a Haitian lawyer for the cholera victims suing the UN, told local media a week after the Security Council vote. He was unhappy with the plan to replace MINUSTAH with the new mission, to be known as the Mission des Nations Unies pour l’Appui à la Justice en Haïti (UN Mission for the Support of Justice Sin Haiti, MINUJUSTH)

“The UN can change the name, but impunity continues,” he said. “Haitians must rise and ask for the complete departure of the UN, which is an occupation force that worsens the country’s situation.”

Sexual exploitation

Regarding the sexual crimes, an independent report issued in January highlighted what it described as “the alarming magnitude of sexual exploitation and abuse [SEA] at the hands of UN personnel in Haiti.” The report pointed out that “actions taken ... do not appear to have been adequate in preventing further SEA perpetrated by MINUSTAH personnel.”

Contrary to Honoré’s favorable evaluation of the mission’s work, the local police force still seems to be in need of much improvement, as is the country’s justice system.

In its latest report, issued in March 2017, the US State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs stated that the PNH “still faces challenges regulating its internal affairs, particularly in the south and in remote provinces.” It also pointed out that between December 2015 and September 2016, 20 officers had been removed from the force, for reasons “stemming from abandonment of post and corruption.”

According to the report, the PNH is expected to graduate 950 recruits this year and to meet its goal of having 15,000 officers capable of assuming “greater responsibility for security ahead of the drawdown and eventual withdrawal” of the Blue Helmets.

“Ongoing US-supported training for high-ranking ... officials at the Inter-American Defense College, FBI Academy, and other partnerships with US police agencies have the potential to develop leaders who will serve as positive change agents” for the PNH, the report said.

The bureau also referred to what it described as a “systematically poor judicial performance, due to antiquated penal and criminal procedure codes, opaque court proceedings, lack of judicial oversight, and widespread judicial corruption.”

With the PNH and the justice system as key focal points, MINUJUSTH has been conceived as a considerably smaller force made up only of police personnel—295 officers making up a maximum of seven units—and its general task has been officially described as reaffirming MINUSTAH’s achievements and helping to strengthen Haiti’s democratic institutions.

The Blue Helmets’ imminent withdrawal has raised concern in the Dominican Republic. During an official visit to the neighboring country on April 27, Antonio Rodrigue, Haiti’s foreign affairs minister, met with his Dominican counterpart, Miguel Vargas, and tried to ease his worries

“MINUSTAH has helped strengthen the National Police in a way that it can ensure security in Haiti,” Rodrigue said during a joint press conference in Santo Domingo immediately after the meeting. “Today, Haiti’s National Police is able to do its job and provide the population with the safety it needs ... we can take the security duties in our hands.”

Rodrigue explained that the new force, MINUJUSTH, would be “tasked with reinforcing the progress we’ve made in justice and democracy, and also to continue helping us in strengthening democratic institutions.”

But shortly before that visit, Haitian Senate President Youri Latortue suggested that Haiti’s armed forces—dissolved 20 years ago by Aristide due to human rights violations—should be restored. Contrary to Rodrigue’s assessment, Latortue argued that the PNH by itself would not be able to ensure the nation’s security.

“We’re beginning discussions to see how we can ensure that we’re not going to need foreign forces in the future,” he told reporters.

Also before Rodrigue’s visit, Sigfrido Pared, a retired Navy admiral who is now the director of the Dominican Republic’s Departamento Nacional de Investigaciones (National Investigations Division, DNI), had told a local radio station that his country’s armed forces would have to step up their capacity along the border with Haiti. In an interview with Radio La Nota 95 FM, Pared noted that the Dominican Republic’s special unit for border security (Cuerpo Especializado de Seguridad Fronteriza Terrestre, CESFRONT) has no Haitian counterpart with whom to coordinate operations.

“When the Haitian armed forces existed, there was permanent coordination with the Dominican commanders for border control and supervision, but that doesn’t exist any longer,” Pared said. He also noted that the Dominican military’s main defense concern is the land boundary both countries share.

According to Pared, because of its geographical location, the Dominican Republic is a high-risk country regarding drug trafficking. The US State Department shares the Dominican Republic’s concern for Haiti’s security situation when it comes to drug trafficking.

In its March report, the bureau explained that “Haiti remains a transit point for cocaine originating in South America and marijuana originating in Jamaica en route to the US and other markets. This traffic takes advantage of Haiti’s severely under-patrolled maritime borders, particularly on the northern and southern coasts.”

The report acknowledged that the Haitian government has continued to strengthen the police and its drug enforcement unit “with additional manpower, and officials at the highest levels of government have repeatedly committed to fight drug trafficking.” Nevertheless, “while drug and cash seizures were higher in 2016 than in previous years, the government has been unable to adequately secure borders to cut the flow of illegal drugs.”

The report noted that principal land border crossings with the Dominican Republic “are largely uncontrolled and the southern coastline remains virtually enforcement-free.”

The Haitian Coast Guard, it said, has “minimal interdiction capacity,” which creates a low-risk environment for drug traffickers to operate.”

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