

WASHINGTON **Examiner**

Biden weighs military help for Haiti as some fear exodus to US shores

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The killing of Haitian President Jovenel Moise, a banana exporter-turned-politician, in a hail of bullets on the morning of July 7 threatens a political crisis in a country that could lead to a wave of migration to the United States.

The circumstances of the murder remain murky.

“None of the president's guards were wounded. ... These mercenaries seem to have gone in unopposed, largely, identifying themselves as agents of DEA, again, apparently paid for by a U.S. resident who fancied themselves the replacement political leader of Haiti,” said Justin Logan, senior fellow at the Cato Institute. He pointed to the “sensational, almost unbelievable story behind how this happened.”

The Haiti National Police said there are 28 suspected assassins, of whom more than a dozen are arrested, three dead, and more at large. Former Colombian soldiers made up most of the group, along with two Haitian Americans who claim they were hired as translators. Some of the assassins are former Drug Enforcement Agency and FBI informants, the Miami Herald reported.

The “mastermind,” according to Haitian police, is a Haitian doctor who lived 20 years in Florida. Others paint him as an unlikely and unreliable person to lead such a plot, who lacked the resources to pay a mercenary hit team each earning thousands of dollars a month.

The story is complicated by reports that Moise’s presidential guard emerged unscathed from the attack, which reached his bedroom, itself reinforced by a coded entry system.

An audio recording was posted to the Twitter account of Moise’s wife, who is being treated in the U.S. for her injuries in the attack. Some outside experts deemed it fake.

“It’s almost a Jeffrey Epstein-matryoshka doll of intrigue,” Logan said.

A request by Haitian authorities to send U.S. troops to the country has also raised alarms, as Haitian residents voice doubts about the charges leveled by the National Police. The last

assassination in Haiti occurred more than a century ago, one of seven between 1911 and 1915, and ushered in a military occupation by the U.S. that lasted until 1934.

Garry Pierre-Pierre, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and founder of the Haitian Times, said evidence had been destroyed and cars burned.

Colombian authorities reported that in recent months, a senior member of Moise's security detail traveled through Bogota, stoking intrigue. Dimitri Herard, head of security at Haiti's presidential palace, made trips to Ecuador, Panama, and the Dominican Republic between January and May, each time traveling via the Colombian capital.

"What type of message does the assassination of President Moise send to the rest of the Americas?" a source close to El Salvador President Nayib Bukele said before speculating "something rotten in the state of Foggy Bottom." Biden administration officials have been critical of Bukele, accusing him of attempting to consolidate power and of actions they say undermine the country's judicial system.

Soon after the murder, Haiti's interim leader requested troops from the U.S. and the United Nations, which he proposed as a measure to safeguard critical infrastructure in the country.

Sources cautioned this idea, pointing to the long history of U.S. intervention in the country.

Others look more favorably on the suggestion, but one source close to a prominent opposition leader said they were not getting their hopes up.

"Security is an important issue," this person said, adding, "I don't think anyone is optimistic that U.S. troops will actually be deployed."

The idea was broached with the U.S. last week when acting Prime Minister Claude Joseph, one of three politicians vying for control of the state, voiced the idea to Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Joseph has since imposed a two-week state of emergency.

Press secretary Jen Psaki said Monday that the U.S. would not "rule out" sending troops to the country.

"What was not clear is what the future of political leadership looks like in the country," Psaki added.

The Biden administration was still weighing the decision late Tuesday. Officials did not respond to questions about a timeline for a decision.

Other Haitians, at home and in the diaspora, say there is scant interest in the prospect of a U.S. military return.

"We've been there before. And we know it doesn't work," said Pierre-Pierre. "We shouldn't go back to failed policies."

The spiraling crisis coincides with the final stages of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, a 20-year deployment that drew resistance. Joseph's request for U.N. forces would separately require Security Council authorization.

The basic facts are still obscured, said Logan, and these should be resolved before deploying military force.

“It may be the case that somebody in the intelligence community somewhere has answers to these questions. But they aren't being politically debated,” Logan said.

Domestic politics is often what drives the U.S. response overseas, said Michael Shifter, president of the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington-based forum on Western Hemisphere affairs. The White House is facing a surge in migration to the southern U.S. border.

Under the circumstances, officials may hope to secure a devolving situation in Haiti quickly. “The challenge is how the U.S. can remain engaged without committing troops,” Shifter said, for which there is likely to be little appetite.

For the Biden administration, and for Haiti, military intervention carries risks.

“We just left Afghanistan, and we're discovering that a political entity we've been supporting consistently for 20 years cannot survive in the space of adversarial politics,” Logan said. “Do we have a strong grasp on where the political center of power is in Haiti today? I'm not sure we do. And if we do, then it would be good to hear a coherent, persuasive explanation of that. And a connection of that analysis to the desired outcome and the role that U.S. military power would play there.”

In Afghanistan, analysts say the U.S. military suffered from mission creep, and deployments to Haiti in 1994 and 2010 ran the risk too.

But the reality of Haiti's instability could soon come crashing down. “It is conceivable to see a mass outflow of Haitians,” Shifter said.

Record numbers of migrants arriving at the southern U.S. border have posed a vexing political problem for the White House and for Vice President Kamala Harris, who was entrusted with the task of stemming the number of arrivals from Latin America.

“The real issue, which seems to be the overriding interest right now for the United States in the region, is migration,” Shifter said. “That's the main concern — if there is a massive outflow of migrants, that becomes a very serious issue for the United States.”

“It worries them in Central America. And it worries them in Haiti,” Shifter said. “This is the issue on which Biden, and the Democratic Party, is most politically vulnerable.”

On Tuesday, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas delivered a pointed message to Haitians and neighboring Cubans, as each faces escalating political crises in their home countries.

“Any migrant intercepted at sea, regardless of their nationality, will not be permitted to enter the United States,” Mayorkas said during a press conference at the U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters. He said Coast Guard officials had been deployed to monitor the air and sea. Instead, people with asylum claims would be referred to third countries to await resettlement.

Mayorkas said that there has not been an uptick in attempted crossings at this time, but local officials have already begun preparing.

Miami-Dade County Public Schools has started reviewing protocol ahead of a possible enrollment surge of foreign students arriving from Haiti and Cuba next month, schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho said in a news release this week.

The extent of Washington's involvement envisioned by President Joe Biden is unclear.

The president condemned Moise's killing, calling it a "heinous" crime. The White House late Tuesday outlined a slate of actions and spending to assist Haiti's government.

Biden has staked little interest in Haiti's fraught politics over a decadeslong Senate career focused on foreign policy. As other Democrats sought to restore Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power, by force if necessary, Biden held back.

"If Haiti, a God-awful thing to say, if Haiti just quietly sunk into the Caribbean or rose up 300 feet, it wouldn't matter a whole lot in terms of our interest," Biden, then a Delaware senator, said in a 1994 interview with Charlie Rose.