United Nations Permanent Forum on People of African Descent
Position Paper on the human rights situation in Haiti and its historical roots
January 2025

Background

The United Nations Permanent Forum on People of African Descent became operational on 2 August 2021 through UN General Assembly Resolution 75/314. It is mandated, inter alia, to contribute to the full political, economic, and social inclusion of people of African descent in the societies in which they live as equal citizens without discrimination of any kind and contribute to ensuring their equal enjoyment of all human rights. Additionally, the Permanent Forum is mandated to provide, in coordination with existing mechanisms, expert advice and recommendations to the Human Rights Council, the Main Committees of the General Assembly and organs, programmes, funds and agencies of the UN system.

This position paper outlines the view of the Permanent Forum on the entrenched human rights crises in the Republic of Haiti as rooted in legacies of enslavement, colonialism, debt payments, military threats and interventions that have fuelled the protracted multidimensional crises in the country.

The Permanent Forum is greatly concerned about the ongoing unabated security, political, humanitarian and human rights crises in the Republic of Haiti, where armed men and women perpetuate violence and human rights violations with impunity, resulting in fear, insecurity, instability, and a record 1.04 million internally displaced in January 2025[1]. The Permanent Forum appreciates efforts from States, international and regional organizations, as well as civil society organizations aimed at addressing the security and humanitarian crisis in Haiti. The Permanent Forum notes that the Haitian Transitional Presidential Council (TPC), established in April 2024, is tasked with guiding the process toward the stabilization and sustainability of Government, free and fair elections and the rule of law.[2] While Haiti's security and humanitarian situation remains high on the international agenda, the Permanent Forum is of the view that as sustainable development takes centre stage, emphasis must be placed on the country's entrenched structural and systemic injustices and their historical roots.

The Permanent's Forum's decision to prepare this position paper came as a result of discussions and recommendations from its first three sessions. The paper has been prepared in consultation with several partners, including the UN anti-racism expert mechanisms as well as academics and civil society organisations. In preparation of the paper, the Permanent Forum disseminated an 'Expert questionnaire on the historical legacies in Haiti's humanitarian crisis'[3] and received several substantive responses that were used to inform this paper alongside reports and resolutions of the UN, scholarly articles, and other secondary resources.[4] Online consultations were also held with civil society representatives, and scholars on Haiti's history and its legacies.

In recognition of the first and Second International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024 and 2025-2034)—which centre recognition, justice, and development for people of African descent—the Permanent Forum underscores that Haiti's ongoing crisis is directly relevant to the International Decades' objectives. Addressing the systemic and structural injustices faced by Haitians aligns with the International Decades' call for concrete actions to confront and remedy the legacies of enslavement and colonialism.

With the UN General Assembly's proclamation of a Second International Decade for People of African Descent, the global community renews its commitment to overcoming systemic racism within and

[1] IOM, (2025, January 14). "*Haiti Displacement Triples Surpassing One Million as Humanitarian Crisis Worsens*". Retrieved from https://www.iom.int/news/haiti-displacement-triples-surpassing-one-million-humanitarian-crisis-worsens
[2] CARICOM, (2024, May 30). "*CARICOM Statement on the designation of a Prime Minister in Haiti*". Retrieved from https://caricom.org/caricom-statement-on-the-designation-of-a-prime-minister-in-haiti/
[3] See Appendix A
[4] See Appendix A

among countries, delivering reparatory justice, and empowering African-descended populations worldwide. Haiti's situation must remain a central focus within this expanded framework, ensuring that lessons from the first International Decade are built upon and that sustained momentum carries over into the next ten years.

Historical legacies: Making the connections to Haiti's current realities

The Permanent Forum acknowledges the unique role of Haiti in the history of anti-colonialism, anti-racism, the abolition of enslavement and the Pan-African and other movements for the human dignity, rights and self-determination of Africans and people of African descent across the world. Haiti's rich cultural legacy—strongly rooted in African traditions—has long served as both a symbol of resilience and a framework for collective identity. This heritage, expressed through language, literature, African-derived spirituality, art, music, dance, and community practices, continues to positively shape Haiti's social fabric and national identity. The Permanent Forum emphasizes the importance of preserving and celebrating these cultural assets, including the development of robust educational curricula on Haitian and African diaspora heritage, and sustained support for Haitian cultural institutions and practitioners. Recognizing and strengthening Haitian cultural identity and Haiti's pioneering anti-colonial, abolitionist and anti-racist history can help bring the world closer together in times of growing global divides, heal the deep social and international rifts of centuries of colonialism, and contribute to sustainable development, reinforcing the dignity and self-determination of Haitians.

The current crisis in Haiti is not a historically and geographically isolated event. Haiti's history is deeply intertwined with the profound impact and legacy of French colonization and the institution of enslavement in the Caribbean. In the 17th century, France established a colony on the western part of Hispaniola Island, now modern-day Haiti. This colony, known as Saint-Domingue, was highly profitable due to its extensive cultivation of cash crops such as sugar, coffee, and indigo.[5] The wealth generated from these crops was built on the enslavement of Africans who endured harsh and deplorable conditions on the plantations of extreme forms of violence and other severe mistreatment, forced labour, genocide and other crimes against humanity. In 1791, the enslaved people of Haiti rose up in rebellion against French colonial rule and established the independent Republic of Haiti in 1804. For this courageous, unprecedented act, the country was severely punished, aggressed and suppressed by the former colonial enslavers and other countries. This included, but was not limited to, being made to pay insurmountable and fiscally devastating indemnities for its own liberation.

The social and economic costs of the Haitian Revolution 1791-1804 were followed by social and economic sanctions, trade embargoes, economic isolation, and protracted foreign military interventions, including obstruction of boat traffic to and from the island.

The High Commissioner for Human Rights, following his official visit to Haiti in February 2023, stated that the country was "born out of the fight for dignity and human rights against colonialism, slavery, systemic racism and oppression."[6] The Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and racial intolerance, made reference to the situation in Haiti in her report on reparations for racial discrimination rooted in slavery and colonialism.[7] As her report affirms, in 1825 (two hundred years ago this year) Haiti was forced into an agreement to pay 150 million gold francs to France to compensate French planters for "lost property" (land and enslaved people), an

[5] Wood, L. M. (2014). Across Oceans and Revolutions: Law and Slavery in French Saint-Domingue and Beyond [Review of *The Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution*, by M. W. Ghachem]. *Law & Social Inquiry*, *39*(3), 758–782. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24545678

[6] OHCHR (2023, February 10). *UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk concludes his official visit to Haiti*. Retrieved from: https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2023/02/un-high-commissioner-human-rights-volker-turk-concludes-his-official-visit-haiti

[7] Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance (2019). *Contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and racial intolerance*. *United Nations*. https://undocs.org/A/74/321

amount that was well in excess of the planters' actual financial losses.[8] The Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent have also stated that Haiti "paid an independence ransom, for a period of one hundred and twenty-two years, which contributed to leaving Haiti impoverished and many of its people destitute until today."[9]

The newly independent Haiti became financially dependent on foreign loans for its payments to France and for its very survival, resulting in mounting debt and insufficient investment in development institutions and processes for well over 100 years. The crushing debt load from interest payments created a devastating cycle of debt and entrenched poverty. By 1898, fully half of Haiti's government budget went to paying France and the French banks. By 1914, that proportion climbed to 80 percent.[10]

The protracted lack of investment in Haiti's socio-economic development, alongside economic and political isolation lead primarily by pro-enslavement supporters, trade embargoes and nonrecognition for nearly 60 years in some cases[11], and the payment of reparations to France as well as hefty interest rates to foreign banks have collectively burdened Haiti, impeding its progress and stability. The invasion and occupation of Haiti by the USA between 1915 and 1934 placed a further burden on the country, leading to increased political unrest and had a profound impact on Haiti's development. The treaty signed between Haiti and the United States in 1915 regarding the finances, economic development, and tranquillity of Haiti,[12] served as a mechanism through which foreign powers continued to exert control over Haiti's economic destiny, impeding the nation's path to economic self-determination and sufficiency, and perpetuated a state of economic dependency that would persist long after the occupation had ended.[13]

It is the position of the Permanent Forum that at the root of Haiti's current crisis are these historical events and circumstances. As stated by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres' during the General Assembly event marking the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, on 27 March 2023, 'we can draw a straight line from the era of colonial exploitation to the social and economic inequalities of today.'[14] Although he was not specifically speaking about Haiti, nowhere among the former colonies is this truer than in Haiti where the scars of enslavement and colonialism are still visible in persistent disparities in wealth, income, health, education and opportunity.[15]

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[8] Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. (2019). *Contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and racial intolerance. United Nations*. https://undocs.org/A/74/321

[9] OHCHR (2024, August 31). *The quest for self-determination: In solidarity with the people of Haiti and people of African descent worldwide*. Retrieved from: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/racism/wgeapd/statements/20240904-WG-Statement-International-Day-for-People-African-Descent-EN.pdf

[10] Dubois, L. (2013). *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* (pp. 7-8). New York: Picador.

[11] Perceived as a threat to other enslaving and colonial powers, France did not recognise or trade with Haiti until 1825, Britain did not recognise Haiti until 1833, and the United States not until 1862, some 58 years after Haiti's independence.

[12] Finch, G. A. (1916). The Treaty Between the United States and Haiti of September 16, 1915. *American Journal of International Law*, *10*(4), 859–865. doi:10.2307/2186937

[13] Knox, R. (2020), Haiti at the League of Nations: Racialisation, Accumulation and Representation, *Melbourne Journal of International Law*, *21* (2)

[14] United Nations (2023, March 27). *Secretary-General's remarks at the General Assembly event marking the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Retrieved from: https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2023-03-27/secretary-generals-remarks-the-general-assembly-event-marking-the-international-day-of-remembrance-of-the-victims-of-slavery-and-the-transatlantic-slave-trade

[15] United Nations (2023, March 27). *Secretary-General's remarks at the General Assembly event marking the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Retrieved from: https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2023-03-27/secretary-generals-remarks-the-general-assembly-event-marking-the-international-day-of-remembrance-of-the-victims-of-slavery-and-the-transatlantic-slave-trade

Civil society organisations attending the first three sessions of the Permanent Forum called for reparations and restitution for Haiti, beginning with an honest acknowledgement of Haiti's long and painful journey and the extent to which the country's sovereignty and self-determination has been undermined for centuries[16] including through economic, material, physical exploitation and psychosocial terror,[17] leading to the current crisis.

The Durban Declaration and Programme of Action states, "the moral obligation on the part of all concerned States" and calls upon "States to take appropriate and effective measures" to halt and reverse the lasting consequences of slavery, the slave trade, the transatlantic slave trade, apartheid, genocide and past tragedies[18].

Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley echoed this sentiment in her call for reparations which she says must begin with an apology for enslavement, the trade in enslaved persons of African descent and colonialism, which has left the Caribbean region highly indebted and Haiti in particular the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.[19] The full recognition and acknowledgement of the past injustices against the Haitian people and their lasting consequences, including as regards climate justice and the position of Haiti in the international order, is the beginning of a path to truthfulness, reconciliation and justice, as well as to hearing claims for reparations, in line with the CARICOM Ten Point Plan for Reparatory Justice and other similar initiatives.

Relevant parties are yet to publicly express their willingness to make amends, including through measures of material, moral, and spiritual reparation.

The Permanent Forum considers that development assistance has proven to be insufficient to quell the crisis in Haiti and to address its chronic underdevelopment. Development assistance must therefore be re-envisioned and considered alongside reparations, taking into account the Sustainable Development Goals, to address the inequalities within Haiti and between Haiti and other States. To address these injustices, a reparatory and transformative justice framework must underpin development programming and peacebuilding efforts. Such a framework explicitly recognizes the historical injustices (e.g., enslavement, genocide, apartheid and systemic racism, economic exploitation, colonial indebtedness) and seeks not only to remediate their impacts but also to empower Haitian communities to define and lead their own pathways to progress. All initiatives concerning the situation in Haiti must include the Haitian people, civil society, and government representatives as well as Haitians in the diaspora.[20] The facilitation of a Haitian led consensus among Haitians, both within Haiti and in the diaspora, to lay the foundation for a more accountable and responsive governance system that addresses the needs and aspirations of the Haitian people is critical.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Permanent Forum considers that Haiti's status in the global context as the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere is a primary outcome of enslavement and colonialism, challenges of socio-

[16] Alexander, L.M. (2022). *Fear of a Black Republic: Haiti and the Birth of Black Internationalism in the United States*, Champaign and Urbana: University of Illinois Press

[17] Lukka, P. (2020, January, 21). Open Democracy, *Can reparations help us to re-envision international development?* Retrieved from: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/can-reparations-help-us-re-envision-international-development/

[18] World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Violence. (2001). *Durban Declaration and Plan of Action*, para 100 to 102. Retrieved from: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/Durban_text_en.pdf

[19] World population review. *Poorest Countries in North America 2024*. Retrieved from: https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/poorest-countries-in-north-america

[20] United Nations. (2023, July, 1). *'Generations of Haitians' at risk, warns Guterres, calling for international force to help quell gang violence*. Retrieved from: https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/07/1138287

economic development and good governance, and that insufficient efforts have been made to assess historical legacies in relation to the ongoing crisis and human rights violations of the Haitian people.

Hence, the Permanent Forum calls on the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly to:

1. *Reparatory justice for Haiti*. Organize a debate in the Human Rights Council on the linkages between the past and present human rights challenges in Haiti with a view to establishing an International Independent Commission of Inquiry into Reparatory Justice for Haiti and to commission an independent expert study on the question of reparations and restitution for the people of Haiti – with reference to the CARICOM Ten Point Plan and other initiatives that identify what constitutes reparations and restitution.

2. *Truth, Justice and Reconciliation*. Support to the Haitian government, in close collaboration with Haitian civil society, to ensure comprehensive truth, justice and reconciliation for the Haitian people.

3. *Sustainable development*. Develop comprehensive, internationally coordinated and Haitian led, inclusive and transparent development aid and sustainable development programs for Haiti, as well as additional technical assistance and capacity building in Haiti, using a human rights-based approach toward modernizing the judicial infrastructure and strengthening the rule of law.

Conclusion and Next Steps

In accordance with the Permanent Forum's mandate and the goal of fostering genuine international collaboration, this Position Paper on the Human Rights Situation in the Republic of Haiti and its Historical Roots will also be formally submitted to the Human Rights Council, the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the UN Secretary-General, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti with specific recommendations. The Permanent Forum will also seek acknowledgment of receipt and continue to engage with these bodies to promote concerted action toward lasting, reparatory and transformative change in Haiti.

This paper reaffirms the importance of coordinating Haiti-focused efforts with the Second International Decade for People of African Descent (2025–2034). By leveraging the renewed momentum and the High Commissioner's leadership, we can sustain and deepen international commitments to ensure Haitians are fully included in the Decade's agenda for recognition, justice, and development.