

CARICOM's Response to the Haitian Crisis: A Critical Evaluation

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On July 1, 2002, Haiti, led by President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, joined the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), marking a significant milestone for the nation, which, like Suriname, is predominantly non-English speaking. However, the groundwork for Haiti's inclusion in CARICOM was laid back in 1997 under President René Prével. CARICOM has historically prided itself on fostering solidarity and cooperation among its 15 member states, striving to overcome the remnants of colonialism and evolve from a Common Market to a Single Market and Economy, all while preserving Caribbean identity and democratic systems.

Yet, despite these lofty principles, CARICOM's response to Haiti's ongoing crisis has fallen short, prompting doubts about its effectiveness and commitment. Notably, in 1994, amidst a violent coup that ousted Aristide, it was a joint effort of U.S. and CARICOM forces that restored him to power. However, this intervention left a divisive legacy, particularly within Haiti's political landscape. Fast forward to 2024, and Haiti's political factions, both domestically and in the diaspora, remain divided over CARICOM's role. Haiti, the Western Hemisphere's second oldest nation and the first Black Republic in the New World, has long grappled with political instability, economic woes, and social unrest. The assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in July 2021 only exacerbated these issues, plunging the nation deeper into turmoil.

In response to Haiti's profound challenges, CARICOM's reaction has fallen short of expectations. Despite being one of the largest member states within CARICOM, Haiti has not received the

substantial support one might anticipate from the regional body. While a High-Level Meeting convened in Jamaica on March 11, 2024, acknowledged the resignation of interim Prime Minister Ariel Henry and the establishment of a Transitional Presidential Council, it “failed” to deliver concrete solutions to address the country's pressing issues. This demand is part of an effort to resolve the ongoing political crisis in Haiti. The Transitional Presidential Council, composed of representatives from various sectors and political groups, is tasked with restoring democratic order. Its fundamental responsibilities include organizing elections and deploying a multinational mission to combat the escalating gang violence in the country. In all honesty, one must recognize the fact that CARICOM members, especially the President of Guyana, Dr. Mohammed Ifraan Ali, requested patience for this on-going process.

Critics argue that CARICOM's shortcomings stem from its failure to take decisive action and devise a coherent strategy to tackle Haiti's root problems. Internal divisions among member states exacerbate the situation, with conflicting interests and priorities impeding a united front. While nations like Jamaica, deeply intertwined with Haiti historically, prioritize its stability, others perceive the crisis as remote and are less inclined to commit significant resources or efforts to its resolution. CARICOM's response, or lack thereof, underscores the challenges inherent in collective decision-making within a diverse regional organization. The differing perspectives and interests of member states often hinder swift and effective action, leaving critical issues unresolved. Furthermore, CARICOM's reliance on symbolic gestures rather than substantive interventions reflects a broader systemic issue of inertia in addressing complex regional crises.

The March 11, 2024 High-Level Meeting serves as a microcosm of CARICOM's struggle to navigate internal divisions and formulate a cohesive response to Haiti's plight. While the acknowledgment of key developments within Haiti's political landscape is a step forward, it falls short of systematically addressing the urgent needs of the Haitian people and stabilizing the nation. Without a unified and proactive approach from CARICOM, Haiti's challenges are likely to persist, further underscoring the imperative for regional cooperation and solidarity in times of crisis.

Moreover, CARICOM's reliance on external actors, rather than asserting its autonomy, has raised questions about its leadership. Despite being a collective entity, CARICOM's deference to international institutions diminishes its regional influence. However, it's essential to understand

that CARICOM cannot act unilaterally on behalf of the entire Caribbean community and requires resources and institutional support to stabilize Haiti. Haiti's challenges are complex and burdensome. And critics must recognize that CARICOM has achieved a significant breakthrough in its efforts to resolve Haiti's multidimensional crisis by submitting the names of the Presidential Council members to the resigning Haitian Prime Minister, Ariel Henry. This action indicates progress toward providing the country with another transitional government that hopefully will take its mandate seriously.

Moving forward, the Caribbean Community faces a critical juncture where reaffirming its commitment to solidarity and founding principles demands a shift from rhetoric to actionable steps. This imperative involves a multifaceted approach aimed at addressing the underlying issues plaguing Haiti. Concrete strategies must be developed, focusing on not only immediate relief efforts but also long-term solutions, such as strongly scaffolding Haiti's governmental institutions. These strategies should encompass socio-economic development initiatives, governance reforms, and measures to enhance security and stability within Haiti. Furthermore, fostering critical dialogue among CARICOM member states about the future of Haiti is paramount. Collaboration and cooperation are essential for pooling resources, sharing expertise, and coordinating efforts effectively. This dialogue should transcend mere discussions and lead to tangible agreements and joint initiatives aimed at addressing Haiti's challenges comprehensively.

CARICOM must also leverage its relationships with regional and international partners to garner support for Haiti. Collaboration with organizations such as the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and international aid agencies can provide additional resources and expertise. However, CARICOM must maintain its autonomy and leadership role in the process. While external assistance is valuable, it should complement rather than dictate CARICOM's actions.

Critics may question CARICOM's response, citing concerns about sovereignty and autonomy. Indeed, Haiti's internal security falls under its sovereignty, but CARICOM's mandate includes promoting regional stability and development. To fulfill this mandate effectively, CARICOM must adopt a proactive and coordinated approach, demonstrating genuine support for its Caribbean neighbor. This approach should not be perceived as carrying out the bidding of external powers but rather as a demonstration of CARICOM's commitment to solidarity and collective action

within the region. To that end, in a March 28 letter addressed to Ariel Henry, The Chairman of CARICOM, President Mohammed Ifraam Ali, emphasized to the resigning Haitian Prime Minister, Henry, the importance of deploying the Multinational Security Support mission to assist the Haitian police in restoring security and stability in the country, with a view towards elections and the “long-term recovery of Haiti’s growth and development.”

Finally, CARICOM's response to the multifaceted crisis in Haiti requires a nuanced and comprehensive strategy that goes beyond mere rhetoric. It demands proactive engagement, genuine collaboration, and assertive leadership, all rooted in the principles of solidarity and autonomy. By translating words into concrete action and fostering genuine partnerships, CARICOM can play a crucial role in addressing Haiti's challenges and advancing the well-being of the Caribbean region as a whole. Haiti cannot be perished, and at this juncture, Haiti cannot be auto-revived.