
Another Border Wall Rises South of U.S.

Dominican Republic aims to keep out Haitians, amid their country's chaos

BY SANTIAGO PÉREZ

DAJABÓN, Dominican Republic—The Caribbean island of Hispaniola, shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic, has been divided for centuries, sometimes bitterly, by language, race, history and culture. As Haiti descends further into chaos and collapse, the divides are becoming concrete—literally. The Dominican Republic is speeding up work on a wall along the 250-mile border cutting across the interior of the island.

Dominican President Luis Abinader is aiming to block human smugglers or criminals from crossing the border.

He has long warned the United Nations and others about what would happen if Haiti collapsed. In the past few weeks, the Haitian government has spiraled into anarchy, its prime minister has been unable to return from a trip abroad and large tracts of Port-au-Prince are under the control of warlords and gang leaders such as Jimmy “Barbecue” Chérizier, who is pushing to uproot the entire political system.

“We were the first to warn that Haiti was turning into another Somalia,” Abinader said in an interview at the ornate presidential palace in the Dominican capital, Santo Domingo.

Abinader signed off on plans for the wall three years ago, modeling it on the fortifications Israel built in the Golan Heights to separate it from Syria. It is one of the latest efforts to build walls or other obstacles to illegal migration around the world, including on the U.S. southern border. Poland began building barriers in recent years when Russia and Belarus flew in migrants from Syria and Afghanistan and set them loose to make their own way into Europe.

As in the U.S. and much of Europe, control of the border has become a driving force in the Dominican Republic's coming election. If Abinader wins re-election in May, the plan would be to complete the \$120 million barrier along the border. Polls show that security is a top concern for Dominican voters, and he's likely to win.

Beyond complaints from human rights and religious groups, there is little opposition to the wall. Former President Leonel Fernández, Abinader's main opponent in the May election, has said the border wall is necessary because of the security risks linked to Haiti's deterioration. He has urged the government to strengthen the wall's technology tools to deter human smugglers.

Abinader put the country on maximum alert earlier this month after gangs attacked police stations in Haiti and freed nearly 4,000 inmates from two prisons. Intelligence briefings, he said, indicated that rising lawlessness “was pushing Haiti into the abyss.”

The Dominicans rushed thousands of soldiers to the border to strengthen surveillance and prevent any escapees crossing over from Haiti.

The first stage includes the development of a 12-foot-high wall, half of it made of concrete, with a metal fence and razor wire on top that extends for some 30 miles along Haiti's most populated border areas.

The barrier was first proposed in the Dominican congress by Vinicio Castillo, then a far-right legislator. “It was in 2014, well before President Trump came up with a similar idea,” said Castillo, who is now running for senator.

“At that time it was seen by some sectors as an extremist idea, but it actually fell short as Haiti collapsed,” he said. “Because of the risk of famine, Haitians either take a raft to Miami or they come here. For us it would be a catastrophe, we are a poor country too.”

The wall now taking shape is dotted with sentry towers, solar-powered cameras and military personnel operating drones along the banks of the polluted Massacre River separating the two countries here in Dajabón, a town of 62,000 in the northern part of the border area.

Haitian officials have expressed concern, and a former Haitian prime minister has called Abinader “anti-Haitian.”

“We are ensuring that this destabilizing situation stops right at the border,” said Abinader.

Deep divides

The wall involves two developing economies informed by a violent history, and the diverging paths on which they now find themselves.

In recent years, the Dominican Republic has emerged as a tourism powerhouse, known for luxurious beach resorts and also for hosting TV shows, including international versions of “Survivor.” It's now one of Latin America's fastest-growing economies, with average incomes seven times those in Haiti, after starting from the same base some 50 years ago.

Rights groups, however, say much of the Dominicans' prosperity is due to the sweat and labor of close to one million poor Haitians who work there and endure discrimination.

Haiti's history has been one of grinding poverty, enormous corruption, military coups and foreign interventions alternating with periods of chaos. It has yet to recover from the 2010 earthquake that leveled much of the capital, killing as many as 300,000 people.

A wide cultural and social divide between the two countries is expressed in language, religion, politics, sports and music. Haitians speak a Creole based on French. Dominicans speak Spanish. Haitians love soccer, Dominicans are crazy about baseball.

“Haiti is in the Americas, but it's not part of the Western world,” said Osvaldo Concepción, a Jesuit priest who runs social programs in Dajabón.

Conservative Dominican politicians and thinkers have tried to create a Dominican national identity that is Span-ish, white and Catholic, while playing down or ignoring the large African contribution to the nation's culture, which some have labeled as Haitian, and un-Dominican.

Battles of colonizers

In the 18th century, French and Spanish colonizers fought ferocious battles for dominance of Hispaniola. The Massacre River forming the northernmost boundary between the two nations is named for one of the bloodier encounters.

Haiti, with a slave-driven sugar economy, was France's wealthiest colony. A slave revolt led to the founding of Haiti in 1804, becoming the world's first Black republic. European countries and the U.S. refused to recognize it at first. They were appalled that slaves might take power and worried that the revolt might spread.

France didn't recognize Haiti's independence until 1825, and only in return for Haiti paying an indemnity of 150 million francs, a vast amount at the time that the French justified as a form of reparations. It later reduced the amount, but poverty and infighting had already badly hampered the new state's development.

In the 20th century, Haiti was dominated by François Duvalier, who was elected president in 1957 and proclaimed himself “president for life” seven years later. Duvalier, a medical doctor known as “Papa Doc” killed and tortured thousands, and stole millions. He was followed by his son Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, who fled the country for Paris after a popular revolt in 1986.

The Dominican Republic has had its share of bloody dictators and foreign interventions. The 20th century saw Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, who ruled from 1930 until his assassination in 1961, kill thousands of political opponents. Notably, he ordered the mass killing of Haitians and Haitian Dominicans living in the border area. Historians say 12,000 to 25,000 men, women and children were killed.

The Dominican Republic has gradually emerged as a dynamic economy with a stable democracy since the 1990s, when it began to open to foreign trade and investment. Among key overhauls, the development of a vibrant tourism industry turned the Dominican Republic into a key Caribbean destination.

In Haiti, the latest phase of turmoil began with the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in 2021. Lacking foreign and domestic political support, the weak hold on power of interim Prime Minister Ariel Henry, a 74-year-old neurosurgeon, pushed Haiti deep into gang warfare.

The U.N. estimates that more than 160,000 people have been forced to leave their homes in the capital area in recent years because of gang violence.

Airports closed amid the chaos, and Henry was unable to return to Haiti this month after visiting Kenya to secure the deployment of a peacekeeping force. He was stuck in Puerto Rico after the Dominican Republic refused a U.S. request to receive him. The reach of the gangs has expanded in recent days throughout the capital. “The circle is closing,” said Frédérique Jean-Baptiste, the child protection program manager of Catholic Relief Services, an aid group. Most schools have closed, with 86 of them becoming emergency shelters for residents fleeing violence and looting. Road blockades prevent water and food delivery vehicles from reaching shelters.

“I try to stay stocked up. The last time I ventured out onto the street to go to the supermarket was a week ago. Many supermarket shelves are now empty,” Jean-Baptiste said.

Mass deportations

The Dominican Republic’s growing economy has long absorbed low-wage workers from Haiti, much as the U.S. has with its southern neighbors.

But now Dominican authorities are forcing back hundreds of Haitians a day, government data show. Close to 225,000 Haitians were deported or expelled last year, including more than 640 pregnant women.

“There are viscerally anti-Haitian sectors that see the Haitian presence as a threat to Dominican identity,” said Edwin Paraison, a former Haitian diplomat who served as ambassador to the Dominican Republic.

U.N. officials have urged Dominican authorities to suspend mass deportations to such a dangerous country. Abinader said his government is following its constitutional mandate.

Abinader said one of the Dominicans’ biggest problems is keeping track of who exactly is crossing the border, because only around 15% of Haitians have an ID card or passport.

The Dominican intelligence service is developing a biometric system to identify Haitians entering the country and determine whether any of the prisoners who escaped in this month’s jailbreak made it across the border. So far none has been detected.

In Dajabón, border police surveil the 25,000 people who come across a pedestrian bridge for a market, a labyrinth of some 2,500 stalls selling foodstuffs that are difficult to obtain in Haiti. On their way back, Haitian women often carry heavy loads on their heads.

“Our worst nightmare is that they close border trade,” said Eddy Bravo, a Dominican owner of a market kiosk. On a good day he can sell up to \$17,000 in goods such as flour or pasta. But sales can plummet on days of turmoil on the Haitian side, when roads and border access are often closed, Bravo said.

The border patrol headquarters is at a former road bridge over the Massacre River. It was destroyed by a flood in 2017 and never rebuilt.

Below, the new wall snakes its way along the Dominican side of the river while people on the Haitian banks wash clothes, bathe or dig up rock and sand to use for construction.

Nearby, at another border bridge, a steady stream of rusty trucks pulled up amid scorching heat on a recent day, each with a blue inscription: Immigration Control. The fingers of dozens of soon-to-be-expelled migrants protruded from the ventilation bars as they shouted in Creole.

“Unfortunately, Haiti is a failed state,” said Santiago Riverón, the conservative mayor of Dajabón who is known for his cowboy hats. “The border wall isn’t just a nationalist symbol. Before we had a persistent cattle theft problem. Rustlers would take 30 to 50 cows in one night. That doesn’t happen anymore.”

Among those being deported was Arsen Telfo, a slim man with teary eyes. “I’ve been working as a laborer on rice and banana plantations for a couple of years after gangs burned down my house in Haiti,” he said. “I will try to return as soon as I can.”

—José de Córdoba and Ingrid Arnesen contributed to this article.