

Timorese gangs and groups increasing, diversifying: new report

— Illicit activities, links to political figures persist —

DILI, 15 APRIL —Timorese gangs and other collectives have diversified and multiplied in recent years, becoming increasingly entrenched in a wide range of illicit activities, including low-level extortion, mobs-for-hire, and organized crime. Although linkages to political figures are generally informal and highly fluid, mob mobilization for party actions remains a feature of the Timorese political landscape, the new report finds.

Evolving from clandestine resistance cells during the Indonesian colonial period, armed groups now include disaffected veterans' petitioners, clandestine associations, political fronts, martial arts groups (MAGs), village-based gangs, youth collectives, and private security organizations. Many are composed exclusively of disaffected youths. But membership appears to be drawn from all sectors and levels of society, including the police force, the army, and the political and economic elite.

Prior to 2006, gangs, MAGs, and other groups were a constant but under-reported feature of post-independence Timor-Leste. During and following the political crisis of April–May 2006, however, an upsurge in gang and related violence occurred over property and access to protection rackets in Dili, and in revenge for previous crimes—whether real or imagined. By the end of the crisis, well over 3,000 homes were destroyed and 140,000 people forcibly displaced. Separately, simmering violence between clandestine group 7-7 and the MAG PSHT did not abate until 2008.

'Groups, gangs, and armed violence in Timor-Leste', published today by Austcare and the Small Arms Survey, provides an overview of the types of gangs and groups operating in Timor-Leste and their activities, communal relationships, and patterns of weapon use. Its key findings include the following:

- While Timorese gang membership, command and control arrangements and motivations are heterogeneous, these groups are commonly organized into patronage and kinship networks centred around a single figure, with loyalty sustained through modest service provision.
- MAGs have grown significantly in reach and influence in recent years; today there are at least 20,000 registered members—and probably at least as many unregistered members—with influence in 13 districts. Dili has become the main battleground for MAGs, and fighting is public and increasingly frequent.
- Factors influencing gang violence include pre-existing conflicts and payback killings among ethnic groups. These grievances can extend back decades and are aggravated by property disputes, systemic unemployment, political disputes, turf rivalries, predatory crime, and self-defence.
- Manufactured small arms and light weapons do not appear to play a major role in exacerbating gang violence in Timor-Leste. Most violence is committed with low-

technology weapons, ranging from stones, arrows, and crude explosives to home-made dart shooters and *rakitans*, although pistols and assault rifles are occasionally used.

- State responses to gangs have ranged from security force-led crackdowns to the brokering of ‘peace processes’ through the Prime Minister’s Office and civil society. Progress is frustrated by limited political investment, poor coordination, and limited financial commitment from international and domestic players.
- There are a number of promising avenues to addressing gang violence. These include inter-agency steering committees on youth policy and mediation, the regulation and registering of specific groups and their leadership, careful and accurate mapping of gang territories, transparent monitoring of the linkages between politicians and gang leaders, and the establishment of gang liaison officers in key villages.

The report is the second in a series of *Issue Briefs* released by the Timor-Leste Armed Violence Assessment (TLAVA), an independent research project overseen by the international NGO Austcare and the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey. TLAVA provides valid evidence-based policy options to reduce armed violence for the Timorese government, civil society, and their partners. The project draws on a combination of methods—from public health surveillance to focus group- and interview-based research—to identify appropriate priorities and practical strategies. TLAVA is supported by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID).

The report is available in English, Tetum, Bahasa, and Portuguese from www.timor-leste-violence.org.

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