

# Groups, gangs, and armed violence in Timor-Leste

On 11 February 2008 Major Alfredo Reinado and a group of ex-F-FDTL<sup>1</sup> soldiers known as the Petitioners, accompanied by allied ex-PNTL<sup>2</sup> members, attacked the residence of President Jose Ramos Horta in Dili. The president, returning home from jogging, was shot and seriously wounded; security officers killed Reinado and one of his men. Less than two hours later, Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão's motorcade came under fire from a group led by Petitioner leader Lieutenant Gastão Salsinha.

The shock of these coordinated attacks ended a brief respite from gang violence that had plagued the country through December 2007. Reinado was known as a key player in a wider network of gangs, political front groups, and patronage groups within the political elite. Although the Petitioners had been a destabilizing force in Timorese politics and society for two years, the threat was not well anticipated.

Armed groups and gangs are not a new phenomenon in Timor-Leste, but evolved from clandestine resistance groups during the Indonesian colonial period to a heterogeneous multitude of collectives, including disaffected veterans, clandestine groups, political fronts, martial arts groups (MAGs), village-based gangs, youth collectives, and security organizations. Nine years after the end of the Indonesian occupation, the fact that gangs have diversified and multiplied is a testament to a range of social tensions in Timorese society and the continued weakness of the state and its institutions. During the occupation these groups protected their communities from Indonesian security forces and the latter's proxies; now they protect their communities from one another.

This *Issue Brief* reviews the presence and roles of gangs in Timor-Leste. In doing so, it examines their recent growth, the threats they

pose, and their use of and access to weapons, in particular small arms. It finds that:

- While a range of membership, command and control arrangements, and motivations guide armed groups in Timor-Leste, they are commonly organized into patronage and kinship networks centred around a single figure, with loyalty sustained through small-scale service provision.
- MAGs have grown significantly in reach and influence in recent years; today there are 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 frequent.
- Factors influencing the likelihood of group violence are diverse and include pre-existing conflicts and revenge killings among ethnic groups that extend back decades, property disputes, systemic unemployment, political grievances, 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 also used.
- State responses to gangs have ranged from security force-led crackdowns to brokering 'peace processes' through the Prime Minister's Office or civil society. Other interventions may also be promising, such as establishing interagency steering committees on youth policy and mediation, regulating and registering specific groups and their

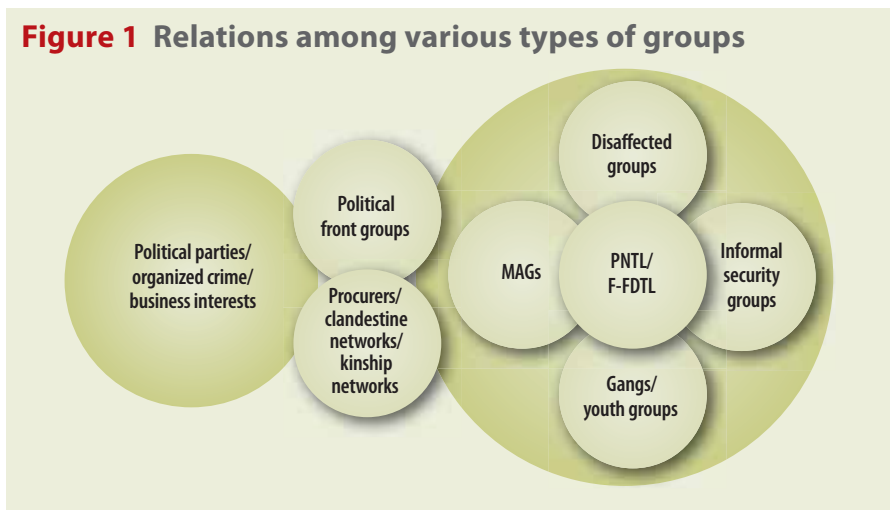
leadership, mapping gang territories, monitoring linkages between politicians and gang leaders, and establishing gang liaison officers in key villages.

## Towards a typology of armed groups and gangs

For a country of less than one million people, Timor-Leste features a breathtakingly diverse array of groups, ranging from MAGs and social movements to small street-corner gangs and youth groups. Like the militia of 1999, however, they are not a new, spontaneous phenomenon. While some might be older, most of these groups had their genesis during the intense militarization of Timorese society under the Indonesian occupation between 1975 and 1999.<sup>3</sup> Most of the current groups either were formed to oppose the occupation or, as with MAGs, are legacies of the Indonesian army's attempts to impose social control. While the bulk of these groups may be composed of disenfranchised youths, their membership is drawn from all sectors of society, with members in the police force, the army, and among the political and economic elite.

It is both difficult and contentious to render clear cut distinctions between these groups. Many exhibit overlapping membership and a number of characteristics in common, such as featuring ex-veterans among their membership or being ex-clandestine organizations. Groups routinely reinvent themselves: the clandestine and disaffected groups, for example, grew out of resistance to the Indonesian occupation, but have since become protest movements, or have formed political parties or become criminal syndicates. There are few reliable figures on the numbers of such groups, and the figures presented here are only

**Figure 1** Relations among various types of groups



estimates. This is due to a lack of in-depth research and because these groups inflate their numbers, which also fluctuate over time due to splintering and other factors. However, the broad relationships among groups can be broadly graphically mapped out (see Figure 1).

MAG and paramilitary leaders generally deny their political affiliations. Unlike some of the political party militias in Indonesia known as *Satgas* (*satuan tugas*), links among politicians, gangs, MAGs, and the different politicized paramilitary groups in Timor-Leste are usually informal and highly fluid. Groups and parties are linked by personal, kinship, and clandestine alliances, and by overlapping membership. Many groups, especially MAGs, have membership or family ties to the main political parties, the police, and the armed forces. Many gang members are also members of MAGs and the larger more politicized disaffected groups. Mobs are therefore mobilized on an as-needed basis through trusted middlemen or fixers, usually related or known to politicians through these networks. Formal links are hard to prove—a reality that gang leaders and politicians are quick to exploit. Table 1 summarizes the various groups by their geographic locations, date of origin, composition and membership estimates, and political allegiances and other features.

Youth unemployment is a major factor in the growth of these groups. About one-third of Dili's labour force aged 25–29 is unemployed or 'discouraged' (no longer actively seeking employment). This figure rises to 60 per cent among male teenagers, and around 50 per cent in the age group 20–24.<sup>4</sup> Coupled with unemployment is a high rate of rural–urban migration, predominantly of young males, from the districts to Dili. Around 40 per cent of Dili's population is composed of internal migrants, and most of this internal migration is recent. The 2004 Census figures revealed

that in just five years, between 1999 and 2004, Dili's population grew from 100,715 to 173,541. According to the same figures, 56.4 per cent of this growth was due to internal migration.<sup>5</sup>

As observed in neighbouring countries such as Papua New Guinea, high rates of rural migration to the city and unemployment breed frustration and social tension.<sup>6</sup> Compounding young males' loss of self-esteem through unemployment is their subordinate social status, as many youth who have come to the city looking for work stay with extended family and are often unwanted guests. Some are little more than domestic slaves.<sup>7</sup> Gangs and MAGs offer these youth companionship, status and protection, free cigarettes and alcohol, and often a source of livelihood.

While in some cases local gangs have become a nuisance by extorting local businesses, drinking, and perpetrating violence, in many cases they are an accepted part of the community. Sometimes gang members are even figures of authority such as village chiefs. Gangs also fulfill an important source of patronage and are often the only source of welfare or credit in poor villages, where few people, if any, have jobs. A more general community ambivalence towards the use of violence to achieve political or social change is also troubling. The support for violent figures such as Major Reinado among disenfranchised urban youths has been much remarked on but his support base was even broader, including within the political and economic elite and among civil society groups concerned with gender violence and human rights.

The political elite have not always provided the (positive) alternative role models required to change community attitudes. The irresponsible use of gangs by political parties as personal security and agents

provocateurs has entrenched the power of these groups and made them more attractive to impoverished youths as a source of income. The tolerance shown towards Reinado and the Petitioners, and the pardoning of key figures associated with the violence of 2006 have also sent an ambiguous message to the wider community, and many observers fear that this will create a climate of impunity.

## Group structures

While MAGs boast national structures and leadership, their leaders do not appear to exert effective control over their entire organizations. Most commonly, they control only those sections of the organization where they share personal or kinship ties through some kind of mutual obligation relationship.

MAG membership is frequently aligned with kinship networks. Each suburb of Dili is divided into villages (*aldeias*). Each village roughly corresponds to the territory of one extended family and it is not unusual for an entire village to belong to one particular MAG. This phenomenon is underscored by the fact that most conflicts in Timor-Leste are between villages, not within them.<sup>8</sup> What can sometimes appear to be a MAG dispute is often a communal dispute, as each community mobilizes its youths to defend its territory. This pattern occurs throughout the country, so that sometimes quite longstanding conflicts are masked as MAG or gang conflicts. Conflicts that begin in a rural district can spread to the capital, as one family uses a MAG to attack another family—for example, over a property dispute—and news spreads; then MAG members from other families or extended families in the capital become involved. Thus what was originally a family dispute becomes a more generalized gang conflict.

Many of the prolific youth groups and street corner gangs that proliferate throughout Dili are family based. Some families may form mutual protection alliances with other families, thus widening conflict to uninvolved parties. This was most evident in fighting in the Bairopite area in 2007, where the youth groups connected to several families joined forces to drive *Persaudaraan Setia Hati Terate* (PSHT), the largest MAG in Timor-Leste, from their area.

Much of the violence of the 2006 period, however, was not organized through cohesive, monolithic gangs, but through personal, family, political, and clandestine networks. Most gangs do not have names and have no static membership, being more

**Table 1** Typology of gangs and other groups in Timor-Leste

Type of group and examples	Geographic range	Date of origin	Composition and number	Political allegiances and other features
<b>Disaffected groups</b> <i>CPDRDTL</i> <i>Colimau 2000</i> <i>Sagrada Familia</i>	National but generally strongest in rural home areas of leadership	Mostly early 2000s but some late 1990s	Older, unemployed, or poor farmers from rural districts with a high percentage of ex-veterans  Numbers in the low thousands	Anti-government, not politically aligned except opportunistically  Specific grievances include jobs for veterans and government assistance for agriculture  Persistently feature in violent demonstrations and other actions
<b>Clandestine groups</b> <i>7-7</i> <i>5-5</i> <i>Bua Malus</i>	National but generally strongest in Dili and the western districts	1980s	Generally composed of unemployed youth, with membership in the security forces; average age 16–35 but leadership older  Numbers probably in the mid-thousands	Often proclaim neutrality but the main groups usually identified with one of the main parties depending on the allegiance of their leadership  Sections of these groups involved in criminal activity and also in the violence of 2006–07
<b>Martial arts groups (MAG)*</b> <i>PSHT</i> <i>KORK</i> <i>Kera Sakti</i> <i>Kung Fu Master</i>	National but often specific to particular villages	Mostly founded under the Indonesian occupation in the 1980s but some, e.g. KORK, claim to be older	All ages, both genders, and all classes of society, including academics and government ministers; strong presence in the security forces  15–20 groups and as many as 90,000 members <sup>9</sup>	Often proclaim neutrality but the major groups are usually identified with one of the main political parties, depending on the allegiance of their leadership**  Mainly legitimate sporting organizations, but are also mobilized by politicians for demonstrations and violence, and by organized crime for security, extortion, and other criminal acts
<b>Political front groups</b> <i>MUNJ</i>	Mainly Dili-based	2006–07	Leadership mostly older, usually employed middle class	Rent-a-crowd outfits formed by opposition political parties to mobilize youth for demonstrations; also act as umbrella groups for a variety of dissident groups with gang links
<b>Gangs</b> <i>Ameu Van Damme</i> <i>Commando Comoro Market</i> <i>Gang</i>	Usually Dili-based, most common in suburbs dominated by rural migrants, around the main commercial zones, including the markets	Some pre-existing 1999 but mostly formed after 2000	All ages but average member in late teens to early twenties  Average size of the bigger gangs is in the low hundreds, but there are countless street-corner gangs with no more than a dozen members	Hired by organized crime, business interests, and political parties for arson, intimidation, and sometimes murder; livelihoods based on petty extortion, theft, and security provision for illegal gambling and brothels; few have official names, being more based around one particular older authority figure
<b>Youth groups</b> <i>Slebor</i> <i>Green Villa Blok M</i> <i>Aqui Jazz</i> <i>Predator</i>	All districts but most prominent in Dili; most numerous in predominantly rural migrant areas	Mostly formed in the 1980s but many new ones formed 2006–07	Mostly late teens to early twenties, with some mixed gender groups, and all social classes, but predominantly unemployed males  Membership ranges from a dozen to the hundreds	Generally apolitical but sometimes mobilized for violence; some were involved in attacking easterners on their own initiative; often support themselves by providing security for shopkeepers, extortion, and petty theft; many perform positive services, civic duties, or sporting, musical and artistic pursuits
<b>Informal security groups</b> <i>Petitioners</i> <i>Railos group</i> <i>Isolados</i>	Mostly rural districts in the western highlands particularly border areas	Appeared throughout the post-independence period but most prolific in the 2005–07 period	Mostly older veterans but some younger ex-F-FDTL soldiers and police officers  Numbering in the hundreds, but individual groups in the dozens	Anti-government but not politically-aligned except opportunistically; grievances centre on issues related to employment in the F-FDTL; have access to manufactured arms; although temporarily disbanded, have the potential to reform quickly

\* A recent report by GTZ posits three types of MAGs: (a) White-suited MAGs that are highly organized, non-violent, and conform to international martial arts standards; (b) MAGs of Indonesian origin such as PSHT and Kera Sakti, not involved in any organized competition in East Timor, and have been implicated in violence; (c) Timorese MAGs who practice an indigenous form of martial arts such as KORK, and build on military command-style structures (some of which have also been implicated in violence).<sup>10</sup>

\*\* KORK, for example, was aligned with FRETILIN under Nuno Soares, but when its original leader Naimori was released from jail he expelled Soares from KORK and disaffiliated KORK from FRETILIN.

\*\*\* The term ritual arts group is sometimes used to describe groups such as 7-7 and Colimau 2000. This is slightly misleading as many MAGs, such as PSHT and KORK, also practice syncretic rituals they believe give them secret powers. Influenced by Javanese mysticism, a number of MAG groups of Indonesian origin believe that their martial arts practice gives them healing powers.



Gang graffiti on an abandoned house, Dili, 2008

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like patronage networks associated with a particular figurehead. Frequently, these figures are ex-clandestine activists or leaders, or heads of family networks. Under the Indonesian occupation, many clandestine networks were based on kinship networks,<sup>11</sup> and many contemporary gangs are similarly structured. The leaders of these gangs also cultivate loyalty through patronage such as loans, cigarettes, or alcohol, or through fear. Many of these figures operate extortion rackets, distributing their gains in the local community to further their own status. Youth are not necessarily paid to carry out criminal acts but may be motivated more out of loyalty and obligation. When political parties or business figures need to organize a crowd these figures act as procurers or fixers. About a half a dozen powerful Dili-based figures have broad power bases, and may call on lesser, more localized figures to organize youth into mobs, for example, to target internally displaced person (IDP) camps or intimidate a business rival.

## Income sources

Protection rackets are a major source of income for most gangs, and as such have become a primary scourge for business and a deterrent to investment. These rackets affect all types of businesses, from small corner kiosks to major construction companies and supermarkets. The markets, bus terminals, and Chinese supermarkets are particularly vulnerable. While some businesses have formed unofficial voluntary contracts with groups to protect them from attack, extortion—sometimes referred to as ‘tax’ or a ‘donation’—is the norm. In most cases, the extortion is small scale and carried out by street-corner gangs but increasingly these groups operate on behalf of larger groups, including Indonesian and Chinese mainland organized crime groups.<sup>12</sup> The

rapid growth of a number of professional security companies has also sparked conflict, as they have competed with gangs for their traditional source of income.<sup>13</sup>

Protection rackets can occur on a larger scale as groups seek to profit from the insecurity. Some gangs heavily involved in the 2006 violence subsequently presented themselves to donors (for a fee) as mediators, thereby first creating the problem and then presenting themselves as part of the solution.

In addition to offering security, gangs also operate as mobs for hire by corrupt politicians, landowners, and organized crime groupings. During the 2006 violence, in particular, there were persistent and credible reports of gang members receiving money for provoking violence and carrying out attacks.<sup>14</sup> The use of gangs and paramilitaries for personal security and intimidation has widespread acceptance. For example, CNRT leaders sent the wrong message when they appointed Vicente da Conceição, alias Railos, to coordinate their campaign in Liquiçá despite his having been recommended for prosecution by the UN Commission of Inquiry for his role in the 2006 unrest.<sup>15</sup>

Gambling, including poker machines, cockfights, illegal lotteries, and more traditional types, is also a lucrative source of income—increasingly so with the arrival of sophisticated poker machine operations with a much higher cash turnover. Again, such operations are more likely to be the preserve of organized crime, but smaller gangs, especially the larger MAGs, provide the security for these operations, as they do for the nightclubs and brothels that proliferate with the increased international presence. As a consequence of the 2006–07 violence, Dili is now carved out into zones controlled

by individual gangs with exclusive rights to income from these illegal activities.

The emergence of a human-trafficking and fledgling drug trade in Timor-Leste makes crime a much more lucrative option for MAGs and gangs, and the potential for violent competition even greater, given the mass scale of some of these groups. The tapping of oil revenues for development funds and a loosely regulated construction boom spurred by the increased international presence are magnets for international organized crime, and therefore business opportunities for these MAGs and gangs.

## In flux: groups from the 2006 crisis to today

Prior to the 2006 conflict, armed gangs, paramilitaries, and MAGs had been a constant, if little reported, feature of the post-independence period. The violence unleashed in the capital and rural areas by the crisis of April and May 2006, resulting in the destruction of up to 6,000 houses and the displacement of over 140,000 people, demonstrates the destructive potential of these groups.

As the political crisis unfolded, disturbances began to break out between eastern and western ethnic groups all over Dili, rapidly escalating into daily full-scale street battles. There were four main sources of the violence:

- **Property disputes.** It is estimated that after the refugee exodus of 1999, 50 per cent of properties in Dili were illegally reoccupied.<sup>16</sup> The generalized violence was used as a cover to evict primarily eastern migrants from contested properties. There is also strong evidence that the violence provided cover for corrupt property developers to clear land for development, with gangs being provided with lists of tenants to evict.<sup>17</sup>
- **Gang turf competition.** After 1999 eastern gangs moved into Dili and controlled the protection rackets and employment in the two main commercial centres—the markets and the bus terminals—in addition to illegal gambling and security provision in nightclubs and illegal brothels. Although many groups were involved, as a result of the 2006 violence, four main western gangs now dominate these rackets in Dili.
- **Orchestrated violence.** There were widespread and credible reports of gang members being paid to provoke violence,<sup>18</sup> and the attacks on refugee camps and other areas followed a sustained and persistent

## Box 1 Chronology of the 2006 political crisis

- 16 March: Five hundred and ninety-four F-FDTL soldiers dismissed for desertion
- 24 April: A group of sacked soldiers known as the Petitioners and their supporters stage demonstrations outside Parliament
- 28 April: A demonstration turns into a riot and two people are killed
- 3 May: Major Alfredo Reinado abandons the F-FDTL military police, taking with him other military police officers, PNTL officers, and weapons
- 23 May: Five killed in an armed confrontation between F-FDTL and Reinado
- 24 May: Attack on residence of F-FDTL commander Brigadier General Ruak by ten PNTL officers led by PNTL deputy commander Abilio Mesquita (also a PSHT *warga* or master) and member of Parliament Leandro Isaac. One person is killed and two injured
- 24–25 May: Nine killed when Petitioners and a group led by ex-F-FDTL member Vicente de Conceicao aka Railos attacks the F-FDTL base in Tasi Tolu
- 25 May: Nine PNTL members killed in a confrontation between F-FDTL and PNTL at the PNTL Dili headquarters; PNTL largely disintegrates as a force in Dili
- 26 June: Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri resigns and Foreign Minister Jose Ramos Horta appointed as interim prime minister

Source: OHCHR (2006), pp. 5–7.

pattern. Truckloads of people regularly arrived from the districts, organized and funded by political front groups like the National Front for Justice and Peace or their political allies such as Colimau 2000. Some witnesses described mobs being coordinated by radio, and a number of police radios were discovered in a raid on a gang headquarters in January 2007.<sup>19</sup>

- **Revenge.** Apart from anger over the killing of the PNTL members on 25 May, unfounded rumours circulated widely of a massacre of 60 people by the F-FDTL. Many people cited this as a source of anti-eastern sentiment, and the F-FDTL, Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, the Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente (FRETILIN), and all people of eastern origin were collectively vilified. This rumour exacerbated painful memories of the atrocities committed by FRETILIN in the 1975 civil war (although atrocities were carried out by both sides).

While the violence abated with the resignation of the prime minister in June, it continued at a lower level until peace talks in October secured a truce through the Office of the President. Almost as soon as this political crisis was resolved a new conflict erupted in November between Colimau 2000 and the largest MAG, PSHT, spreading from the western district of Ermera to neighbouring districts and then into Dili, resulting in seven deaths. The cause of the conflict is unclear, but there had been a long-running dispute between these two groups in Ermera, with roots in historical tensions between different villages

going back hundreds of years. There were also strong indications of competition between these groups for control of border smuggling, particularly around the border market in Maliana.

A broader alliance was quickly formed to oppose PSHT composed of clandestine groups and Kmanek Oan Rai Klaran (KORK—the other major MAG). The alliance's public justification for the fighting was that PSHT was an Indonesian-sponsored group. But the more likely rationale, cited by many unconnected groups, was PSHT's aggressive drive for territorial dominance and control of security, protection rackets, and other illegal activities.

Dialogue mediated by the Prime Minister's Office led to the disengagement of most of the opposing groups, but conflict between the group known as 7-7 and PSHT raged throughout 2007, with a major upsurge after the attempted capture of Reinado in March by the International Stabilization Force (ISF) composed of Australian and New Zealand army troops, and around the parliamentary elections in August. Violence was particularly intense in the eastern districts of Baucau and Viqueque, although communal conflict in these regions considerably predates the birth of contemporary political parties and gangs. Part of this conflict can be attributed to forced relocations during the Indonesian occupation and the refusal of settlers to return to their original lands.<sup>20</sup> Similar land disputes motivate other rural communal conflicts in the region, and some of these disputes go back 70 years or more.

Tensions began to abate in early 2008, and while it was feared that the killing of Reinado during the attacks of 11 February 2008 would result in a major upsurge in violence, this did not occur. Following a long-running peace process, two of the main protagonist groups, PSHT and 7-7, concluded a formal truce in August 2008.

## Responses to gang violence

Significant progress has been made in the last year in conflict mediation and efforts to resolve Timor-Leste's complex land ownership issues. The government and communities have worked hard at ensuring public acceptance of returning IDPs, and there has been an extended period of calm since the attacks on the two heads of state in February 2008. There are moves towards implementing a national youth policy and ongoing programmes to strengthen the justice system and reform the security sector. While these initiatives are essential to address the broader, overarching issues that have sparked past conflict, there is a vital need for coherent, consistent, and sustained programmes and policies that specifically deal with gangs and MAGs. There is little to show on this front to date, despite a variety of responses, ranging from the enforcement approach of security forces, both local and international, to more conciliatory government and civil society approaches. The results of these efforts have been mixed at best.

### Government responses

On 27 May 2005, with support from the Asia Foundation, the Communication Forum for Timor-Leste's Martial Arts Groups (FORKAMTIL) reconvened, after an earlier attempt failed in 2003, under the Office of the President, to help resolve MAG conflicts. FORKAMTIL was composed of 14 MAGs, including the two biggest groups, PSHT and KORK.<sup>21</sup> The organization ran several leadership and violence management training workshops in rural districts (excluding Dili) and mediated a code of practice agreed by the leaders of the major groups in 2006. Unfortunately, this agreement had only a temporary effect, as many of these groups could not control their different factions and local branches, especially in remote rural areas. FORKAMTIL still exists, but its funding ran out in May 2007.<sup>22</sup>

The Office of the President also set up a dialogue process in late 2006 to resolve the east-west violence. A group comprising the leaders of the former main antagonist groups organized a series of 'peace demonstrations' ahead of the 12 November anniversary of

## Box 2 The role of arms

Although there were at least 100 gang-related fatalities in 2007, the bulk of gang confrontations are fought with rocks, and at a fairly long distance. Deaths are generally a consequence of easily and quickly produced crude homemade weapons. Apart from an assortment of wooden spears and arrows, the most common of these is the *rama ambon*, a crude dart made from electrical cable or old nails. Fired with slingshots made from rubber bands, these darts are sometimes tipped with poison or battery acid. Lethal at close range, they are generally fired into the air from a long distance and can often be seen embedded high in the tops of trees and telephone poles.

*Rakitans*, or crude home-made muzzle-loading weapons, also present threats. *Rakitans* can be fitted to fire nails, *rama ambons*, arrows, and even real bullets; and while some have crude triggers, most do not. They can look quite real and threatening from the long distances that typically separate gangs during fighting. Crude explosive devices, including Molotov cocktails, have also been employed, but, except for one notorious attack on an IDP camp in 2006, they have not been widely used.<sup>23</sup>

While gang members sometimes speak of unofficial rules of engagement that forbid the use of manufactured guns, there is no doubt that, with links to the security forces, all the major gangs have access to such weapons. One factor discouraging gun use may be that communal disputes sometimes pit former friends and neighbours against one another, and resistance is strong to seriously injuring a former friend.



Rama ambons collected in police raid, Dili, 2008  
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Most fatalities appear to occur at close range in revenge-style ambushes. The use of manufactured weapons in communal violence in neighbouring Papua New Guinea has seriously escalated violence there,<sup>24</sup> but gangs in Timor-Leste so far seem to abide by the 'unwritten code'. To date, gun use has been limited to gang members from within the PNTL.

## Civil society initiatives

The most sustained and comprehensive civil society-led process specifically to deal with gang and MAG violence so far has been the Action Asia/Hak Association MAG training project. This project, which commenced in September 2006, resulted from a partnership between two international NGOs, Concern and Oxfam, and two national NGOs, Yayasan Hak and NGO Forum. Action Asia, a regional peace-building network, was engaged to run the project. Two members (one senior, one junior) from each of the nine main active MAG groups were selected to participate in a collective one-year peace-building course. One part of the course involved an exposure visit to the Philippines, where they met with key groups that have played a role in promoting the peace process and non-violence in that country, including imprisoned gang members, solidarity groups, and Philippine army officers.

Although one of the two key combatant groups, 7-7, was not initially involved, it joined the final course module and subsequently made a peace pact with PSHT on 27 August 2008, ending a long-standing conflict between the two groups.<sup>27</sup>

Many civil society and international agencies have responded to communal violence using traditional mediation. A number of agencies have tried to utilize traditional ceremonies and traditional authorities, with some degree of success. However, the overlapping nature of communal and gang conflicts can complicate peace agreements, as can the interrelationship of rural and urban communal disputes. Most of these traditional mediation attempts have dealt with conflict at the community level, and so do not take account of gang rivalries. MAG members moving from the districts to the capital or within the capital sometimes spark renewed conflicts, as they were not part of the original agreements. Also, many of the antagonists are migrants from rural districts where the village chiefs concerned have no authority. Many village chiefs have also been compromised by their overt politicization.<sup>28</sup>

Traditional mediation processes with gangs and MAGs could prove highly effective given that respect for traditional law is still very strong in Timor-Leste. As one MAG leader stated, 'God gets you when you're dead; *lulik* (sacred law) kills you now.'<sup>29</sup> A GTZ/EU-funded<sup>30</sup> mediation process supported the national dialogue process with the intention of creating dialogue among MAGs, and included organizational capacity building, especially leadership and conflict transformation skills training.<sup>31</sup>

the Santa Cruz massacre to promote the outcome of this dialogue in the community. While east-west tension has not yet been fully resolved, this truce has largely held.

In parallel, interim prime minister Ramos Horta initiated a separate dialogue process in late November 2006 to mediate the new conflict between PSHT and an alliance of other groups. As a result of this dialogue, a proposal was made to form a special quick-response assistance unit made up of representatives of each group. The proposed unit would be mobilized whenever MAGs were involved in violence.<sup>25</sup> This process was successful with regard to most of the groups involved, but conflict between PSHT and 7-7 continued until late 2007. The Ministry of Labour and Community Reinsertion (MTRC) has also been involved in the national dialogue process, having set up the National Forum for the Dialogue between Martial Arts after the April-May 2006 political crisis, which chiefly comprised the four main warring groups: Colimau 2000, PSHT, KORK, and 7-7. While this forum was

originally a temporary initiative, the MTRC intends to continue its work with MAGs.<sup>26</sup>

The Ministry of Social Solidarity (MSS), supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), has been conducting an ongoing dialogue process to facilitate the return of IDPs to their villages. The MSS recently launched a new dialogue initiative, with five mediation teams working in the five sub-districts of Dili. While not specifically concerned with MAGs, this is the most comprehensive community dialogue process that exists and may act as a curb on MAG violence.

Finally, at the initiation of the secretary of state for youth and sport and some of the more moderate MAG leaders, a law has been drafted to more tightly regulate MAGs. The law has been submitted to the Council of Ministers and approved by the prime minister, but has not yet been promulgated by Parliament.

## Security force responses

The security force has typically adopted a reactive approach to containing gang violence. Formed police units (FPU), the UN Police (UNPOL), and the ISF have all conducted rapid response actions against gang violence, in addition to carrying out regular patrols and establishing static police posts at a number of key hot spots. There have, however, been two key initiatives specifically aimed at combating gang violence, and also an example of a successful community policing initiative.

In response to escalating gang violence, in January 2007 the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) authorized the formation of the Gang Task Force, with members from the UNMIT Human Rights and Political Affairs sections, the PNTL, and the ISF. The Gang Task Force at first attempted to mediate between the warring groups, hosting high-level talks with the major MAG leaders on 24 January at the PNTL Dili headquarters. When this failed UNPOL, FPU, and the ISF, in coordination with the Gang Task Force, raided the headquarters of the largest MAG, PSHT. In what was probably the largest single operation against a gang, the raid resulted in the arrest of the PSHT leader and about 47 of its members, and the seizure of a variety of weapons, including home-made arrows, incendiary devices, police uniforms, and radios.<sup>32</sup>

The raid generated mixed outcomes. One criticism was that it created a vacuum that actually increased the violence: rival gangs moved into the empty territory and burned down the PSHT headquarters and other houses owned by gang members' families, spurring a further round of revenge violence. While the raid stopped the purely localized violence surrounding the PSHT headquarters, it continued in other areas, and other leaders quickly filled the void.

Separately, the new PNTL Task Force was formed in late 2007 by the secretary of state for security. Equipped with riot control equipment, the Task Force was intended as a rapid response mobile crowd-control unit. While it appears to have been relatively effective in combating gang and communal violence, this force has been widely criticized for lack of communication with the ISF or UNPOL, and its reputation for brutality. It also appears to replicate the work of the PNTL Rapid Response Unit, the UIR.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, in late November 2007 UNPOL conducted two successful weapons sweeps in the particularly violence-prone Dili suburb of Bairopite. The success of the

operation can largely be attributed to the consultative approach taken whereby local village chiefs were consulted about and even accompanied the searches, and signed consent forms were obtained from all the households searched.

## Conclusions

Timorese group and gang violence has fluctuated over time, but there is strong evidence that membership in these groups has diversified and grown in recent years. The government and civil society have taken a number of steps to manage and mitigate this development, but weak political will, coordination, and financial commitment have limited the scope of initiatives.

This is worrying, as more concerted efforts on separate fronts are needed.

The multiplicity of mediation efforts suggests that an inter-agency coordinating committee for conflict mediation would be a useful first step to standardize and coordinate approaches, pool funding, retain knowledge, and build expertise in dealing with gangs. Similarly, the interrelationship between gang violence and communal violence points to the need to integrate gang mediation with community conflict mediation programmes.

Apart from acute violence prevention interventions such as these, longer-term efforts addressing the underlying motivations for gang membership are needed. Bringing rival gang members to work together on social programmes and small-business training schemes would provide beneficial opportunities to break the cycle of violence and gang rivalry.

Identifying and monitoring the presence of gang members in state employ is also an important measure to disrupt these linkages. Security forces should be required to declare MAG and gang membership in order to better control the influence of these groups on individual members of the state forces; a MAG membership register would be a useful tool to keep track of these elements. Compelling politicians and civil servants to similarly declare their affiliations would be equally beneficial. Transparency can in itself be a powerful tool.



*Mother and child standing in front of gang insignia, Dili, 2008*  
© JAMES SCAMBARY

Finally, it is clear that gangs respond to perceived and real deficiencies in the Timorese security and justice sectors, and that this context is unlikely to be significantly altered in the near future. But to the extent that police and justice reform can bridge the gap between the government and its citizens, rebuild confidence, and provide meaningful services, these efforts would almost certainly contribute to a reduction in gangs and gang membership, and the violence associated with them.

## Notes

*This Issue Brief was based on research by James Scambary, who has conducted research on Timorese gangs since 2006 for AusAID and the Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum (CPPF) section of the New York Social Science Research Council.*

- 1 FALINTIL-Forças de Defesa de Timor-Leste (FALINTIL: Forças Armadas de Libertacao Nacional de Timor-Leste).
- 2 Policia Nacional de Timor-Leste.
- 3 See, for example, TLAVA *Issue Brief* 1.
- 4 Neupert and Lopes (2006), p. 22.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 6 Ward (2000), p. 231.
- 7 Interview with Fidelis Magalhaes, MAG mediation project officer, Dili, 31 January 2008.
- 8 Interview with Susana Barnes, Australian National University researcher on land and property issues, Dili, 19 January 2008.
- 9 Ostergaard (2005), pp. 22–3.
- 10 GTZ (2007).
- 11 McWilliam (2005), p. 39.

- 12 Interview with senior PNTL officer, Dili, 31 January 2008.
- 13 Interview with senior PNTL officer, Dili, 31 January 2008.
- 14 'Magic And Mayhem: Gang Culture Threatens E.Timor', *South China Morning Post*, 6 December 2007.
- 15 ICG (2008), p. 18.
- 16 Neupert and Lopes (2006), p. 33.
- 17 Harrington (2006), p. 47.
- 18 Interview with UNPOL officer, Dili, 29 January 2008.
- 19 UNPOL broadcast, 1 February 2007.
- 20 Oxfam Timor-Leste (2003).
- 21 'Joint Declaration of Martial Arts Organizations', Dili, 30 June 2005.
- 22 GTZ (2007), p. 26.
- 23 Interview with UNPOL officer, Dili, 29 January 2008.
- 24 See Haley and Muggah (2006), Alpers (2005), and Thompson and Dinnen (2004) for a review of the varied impacts of armed violence on urban and rural Pacific communities.
- 25 Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (2006).
- 26 GTZ (2007), p. 27.
- 27 UNMIT (2008).
- 28 Interview with Catholic Relief Services staff, Dili, 31 January 2008.
- 29 Interview with Fidelis Magalhaes, MAG mediation project officer, Dili, 31 January 2008.
- 30 Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit/European Union.
- 31 GTZ (2007), p. 26.
- 32 UNPOL (2007).
- 33 Interview with UNPOL officer, Dili, 29 January 2008.

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## TLAVA publications

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*Dealing with the kilat: an historical overview of small arms availability and arms control in Timor-Leste*. No. 1, October 2008

### Briefing Papers

Parker, Sarah. 2008. 'Commentary on the Draft Arms Law in Timor-Leste.' *East Timor Law Journal*. Available online in English, Tetum, Indonesian, and Portuguese. <<http://www.easttimorlawjournal.org/Articles/Index.html>>

## TLAVA project summary

The Timor-Leste Armed Violence Assessment (TLAVA) is an independent research project overseen by Austcare and the Small Arms Survey. Working with public and non-governmental partners, the project was designed to identify and disseminate concrete entry points to prevent and reduce real and perceived armed violence in Timor-Leste. With support from a network of partners, the project will serve as a Dili-based repository of international and domestic data on violence trends. Between 2008 and 2010, the TLAVA will act as a clearing house for information and analysis with specific focus on:

- the risk factors, impacts, and socioeconomic costs of armed violence in relation to population health—particularly women, children and male youth, and internally displaced people;
- the dynamics of armed violence associated with 'high-risk' groups such as gangs, specific communities in affected districts, petitioners, veterans, state institutions, and potential triggers such as elections; and
- the availability and misuse of arms (e.g. bladed, home-made, or 'craft' manufactured) as a factor contributing to armed violence and routine insecurity.

The project's objective is to provide 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. Findings will be released in Tetum, Bahasa, Portuguese, and English. TLAVA *Issue Briefs* provide timely reports on important aspects of armed violence in Timor-Leste, including the availability and distribution of small arms and craft weapons in Timor-Leste and election-related violence.



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