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Illegal Weapons and Illegal Groups in Timor-Leste

Introduction

Since the break-out of the political-security crisis in 2006, and after the general election in 2007 which handed power to the Parliamentary Majority Alliance (AMP), the issues of illegal armed groups and illegal weapons not recovered during the joint operations of the Timorese National Police and the Timorese Defense Force (PNTL & F-FDTL), has become a huge concern for the government and the civil society.

The report from the UN Commission of Inquiry dated 2 October 2006 reveals that it was not only PNTL who handed out weapons to civilians, but F-FDTL also handed out weapons to civilians, namely to those considered as veterans of the resistance. However, in the end F-FDTL, through its General Command, recovered all the weapons they had handed out to the veterans and the civilians.¹ Based on the data, there are 16 PNTL weapons still missing, which are currently spread throughout the country.²

We do not have any updated information regarding these weapons, as the competent organs of government, such as the Secretary of State for Security and PNTL have not issued any formal report. Since there were other events that emerged after the 2006 crisis, many people have forgotten about or are no longer debating the issue. This is despite the fact that everybody is aware that issues regarding illegal weapons will always be a threat to human life.

As a new institution, there have been problems facing PNTL since its inception. It started with the insufficient training provided to its members, which was supposed to guarantee that PNTL act in a professional manner. On the other hand, because Timor-Leste is categorized as a post-conflict nation, many members of PNTL have strong political affiliations to certain parties. This was seen in 2006 when the Interior Minister, Rogerio Lobato, attempted to utilize PNTL as an exclusive force for the Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente (FRETILIN) party which contributed to the political-security crisis in the country at the time.³

After the political-security crisis, PNTL attempted to improve its image through Joint Operations with F-FDTL in the search for Gastão Salsinha's group. The leadership also shifted from Paulo Fatima Martins to Afonso de Jesus and lastly, Longuinhos Monteiro was given a mandate to reorganize the entire PNTL structure.

¹ See UN Independent Commission of Inquiry report, Page 56-57.

² STL, 13 January 2010, *UNPOL –PNTL Identified the Illegal Weapons in Timor-Leste*.

³ Hare Hamish Mcdonald, *The Minister Equipped Police as Private Army*, Sidney Morning Herald, June-19-2006.

Only under Longuinhos Monteiro's leadership, have these strange events emerged, beginning with the Ninja activity in Bobonaro and Suai, and the armed illegal group in Ermera just prior to the May 20th celebration.

In this 6th Voice of Mahein report, Fundasaun Mahein will present to the readers, information regarding the events which recently occurred in the village of Fatubolo, Ermera. For most people in Dili, the event in Ermera is an incident which does not require much of their attention.

On the evening of the 16th of May, there were rumors that there was shooting in the village of Fatubolo, Ermera. On the 20th of May, many people were still talking about the rumors. Despite the worries, the 20th May celebrations were held as usual, including those in Ermera.

These rumors about the incident in Ermera, were a continuation of widespread rumors among the Timorese population within the last few months, that there was to be a big threat emerging on the 20th of May 2010, when the Timorese were celebrating the restoration of their independence.

A big question arises. Why are there always rumors, whenever the Timorese are to about to celebrate important events? Rumors that speak of unknown elements intending to create disturbances and ruin these special occasions? Based on information from the local media, we were told that on the evening of the 16th, there were thirteen people, with twelve weapons, who attacked the Special Operations Company (COE) of PNTL in the village of Fatubolo, Ermera. The news reported that the exchange of fire lasted for 2 to 3 hours.⁴

However, if an armed rebel or bandit group can withstand an exchange of fire with the state's force for 2 to 3 hours, does it not indicate that this group might be armed with modern weapons, enabling them to confront the state's force for such a long period of time?

Information collected from the people in Ermera shows that they were not aware of any shootout in Fatubolo, but they mentioned hearing only one gunshot and said that the situation in Ermera remains calm. People carried on with their daily activities as usual and they celebrated the restoration of Independence Day on 20th May 2010 without incident. Since then, the event has not been spoken of on the news and people have rarely talked about what happened in Ermera.⁵

In this short article, Fundasaun Mahein would like remind the readers that before the rumor about the shootout in Ermera, there have been issues regarding Ninjas in the districts of Suai and Bobonaro. The old people say there is no rain without clouds. These Ninjas did not just suddenly appear. There is something else going on.

The Chairman of the National Parliament, Fernando La-Sama de Araujo visited these locations after the PNTL General Commander, Longuinhos Monteiro and his members announced that they were in control of the situation. In his statement, the Chairman of the Parliament showed to the public, a membership ID card of the group called 'Bua-Malus and CPD-RDTL.' It was shocking to see how this card had such a modern

⁴ Hare Timor Post 19-05-2010

⁵ Conversation with Casilda Fernandes, population of Gleno, Ermera district 20-05-2010.

design. Included in the small ID Card were the flags of three political parties, ASDT, FRETILIN and PPT. Many people were surprised and were asking how can the Bua-Malus Group and CPD-RDTL, of which most members live in the districts and remote areas, produce an ID card of this quality. Even a student who attended a computer course might not have the capacity to design it.

Because the government wanted to combat a small group of people in the country, it mobilized a major show of force composed of PNTL and F-FDTL, giving the impression to observers that there was a serious external threat. However, at this stage, we can see that the recent Operations against the Ninjas by PNTL were established not to protect and defend the people from any kind of external threat, but to put pressure on its own citizens. Moreover, the reality shows that the Ninjas are not a big threat to stability. It is the illegal weapons that are the biggest threat.

The latest event to occur was the incident that happened in Fatubolo village, Ermera district. Once again Ermera – although the information collected is still too limited to make a conclusion on whether or not the incident really happened – has become an area of confrontation. In 2006, when the Petitioners group emerged, they established their encampment in the village of Fatubessi in Ermera, which existed until the time they surrendered to the state.

The Ninja case in Suai and Bobonaro, as well as the incident that happened in Ermera on the evening of the 16th of May, are being used to divert people's attention away from the suffering experienced by the rural population after gaining independence. Looking at the "Special Operations" conducted by the members of PNTL against the Ninjas in Bobonaro and Suai, we can a lot of political posturing involved in the operation.

The operation to combat the Ninjas is meant to frighten the members or sympathizers of certain political parties and force the community to re-think their political affiliations before the upcoming municipal elections.⁶

The Issue on Public Information System within the PNTL Institution

The PNTL General Commander, Longuinhos Monteiro, confirmed that there are a number of illegal weapons which have not yet been collected from the community. Longuinhos Monteiro also explained that the illegal groups are utilizing the weapons that belonged to the Indonesian army prior to 1999.⁷

Longuinhos Monteiro also emphasizes that "a former 745 military, retired, and is now leading the armed group in Ermera. They have weapons, and the PNTL is currently establishing an approach with them."⁸ However, Longuinhos Monteiro did not mention in his explanation how many people are involved with this illegal group.

⁶ The Report of HAK Association on the situation in Suai and Bobonaro, 15-February-2010.

⁷ See CIJTL, 20,05, 2010, *Longuinhos; A Former 745 Military Leads an Armed Group in Ermera*

⁸ CIJTL, 20,05, 2010, *Longuinhos; A Former 745 Military Leads an Armed Group in Ermera.*

However, Longuinhos did not clearly mentions the name of the former 745 member and where does he from.

The information published in the local media outlets stated that the exchange of fire between the illegal group and the members of PNTL lasted around 2 to 3 hours. If the exchange of fire between the illegal group and the special police unit lasted for 2 to 3 hours, theoretically, this would require the illegal group to be large in number and well armed. Otherwise, how would they manage to survive such an intense exchange of fire with the state police force? Theoretically only a group with a large number of people could have survived this shootout.⁹

On the other hand, the PNTL Second in Command, Afonso de Jesus emphasized that ever since the PNTL General Commander, Longuinhos Monteiro, left on his official trip to Portugal, the security situation has reverted to normal. There are some elements that spread rumors about arson occurring in Ermera, which resulted in deaths. However, according to the PNTL Second Command, those incidents never happened and the situation in general, is normal.¹⁰

There is a lot of confusion because the explanation given above by the second commander-in-chief, contradicts the information provided by the General Commander, Longuinhos Monteiro. In his press conference held in Dili on 20 May, Longuinhos Monteiro said that the previously mentioned illegal group burned the house of the community and ended up exchanging fire with the Special Operation Company (COE) in the village of Fatubolo, Ermera district.

When confronted about the information provided by the PNTL General Commander, the Second Commander-in-Chief advised that 'every statement made by the General Commander is considered as correct.' However, Afonso de Jesus informed that the PNTL in Ermera, on the ground, are still trying to carry out investigation and collect concrete evidence on the illegal group.¹¹

Up until now, PNTL have not even identified the type of weapons used by the "illegal group" in the attack on PNTL. Afonso de Jesus said that PNTL will collaborate with the entire community to collect these weapons.

In regard to the number of weapons in the hands of the illegal group, there is a mix-up of information between PNTL and the media (Timor Post 19-05-2010). Timor Post said in its publication that the illegal group is composed of 13 people and they have 11 weapons. However, the PNTL Second in Command, Afonso de Jesus insists that based on the available information, the illegal group is only composed of 10 people and they have 9 weapons¹²

Afonso de Jesus also explained that sometimes the community is afraid to give information about what kind of weapons are in the hands of the illegal group because PNTL itself does not know much about the illegal group.¹³

⁹ Dili District PNTL Commander, Pedro Belo, 25-05-2010.

¹⁰ PNTL Second Commander-in-Chief, Afonso de Jesus, Dili, 26-05-2010.

¹¹ Afonso de Jesus, PNTL Head Quarter, Kaikoli, Dili, 26-05-2010.

¹² Afonso de Jesus, PNTL Head Quarter, Kaikoli, Dili 26-05-2010.

¹³ Afonso de Jesus, PNTL Head Quarter, Kaikoli, Dili 26-05-2010.

There will be debates in society regarding the roots of this group. The information so far is a bit mixed-up. The PNTL Second in Command said that this illegal group is composed of those people who escaped from the Ninja operation in Bobonaro and Suai, and are currently re-organizing themselves in Ermera district.¹⁴

On the other hand, the Ermera PNTL District Commander, Mariano Martins, declared that there were no gun shots fired in Fatubolo and that there is no illegal group in the area.¹⁵ This argument totally contradicts statements that the PNTL General Commander and Second in Command have issued. In this case, we can see that there is a lack of coordination between the PNTL Head Quarters in Dili and the PNTL offices in the districts.

The alarmism raised by the General Commander, Longuinhos Monteiro, is no different from the invention of the Ninja situation in Bobonaro and Suai. This operation received strong criticism because PNTL committed human rights violations and spent a large amount of state money, for which no clear outcome can be seen.¹⁶

'Illegal Group, Militarization and the Internal Politic

Referring back to the history, the issue of illegal weapons and groups is not new. In 1975, after the breakout of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal, the Timorese *militias* confiscated weapons from the Portuguese Soldiers arsenal in Taibessi. These weapons were circulated among the UDT and FRETILIN militias, and then the civil war broke on 11 August 1975.¹⁷

After FRETILIN launched a counter coup and managed to take control over most of the territory in Timor-Leste, UDT withdrew to the border of Indonesia. Under Indonesian orders, UDT and APODETE received weapons from the Indonesian military. The Indonesian military provided them with basic military training and in turn they assisted Indonesia in its invasion of Timor-Leste.¹⁸

After FRETILIN withdrew to the mountains and jungles, the fighting with the Indonesian military continued and FALINTIL managed to seize many weapons from the Indonesian military. After independence, no one can guarantee whether those weapons held by members of FALINTIL during the resistance have been handed over to the competent institutions.

It is no longer a secret that 'speeches' on illegal groups in the country are strongly related to the current political situation. The illegal groups often exist just prior to elections. Referring to the incidents of the past, the Petitioners group and Major Alfredo Reinaldo's group emerged in 2006 when the forthcoming general elections were two year away (2008). The Ninja case which occurred in Bobonaro and Suai is similar –

¹⁴ Afonso de Jesus, PNTL Head Quarter, Kaikoli, Dili 26-05-2010.

¹⁵ Timor Post, 28-05-2010. Timor Post, 28-05-2010.

¹⁶ See Press Release of the FRETILIN Opposition Bench in the National Parliament, 28 May 2010.

¹⁷ John G. Taylor, *The Price of Freedom*, Zed Books, 2000.

¹⁸ Irena Cristalis, *East Timor: A Nation's Bitter Dawn*, Zed Books, 2009.

based on the report of HAK Association – and has a strong relation to the upcoming Election of the Municipal Chamber.¹⁹

In 1999 prior to the referendum, the Indonesian military formed militia groups which were fully equipped with arms all across the territory. No one can guarantee whether these weapons have all gone to Indonesia, or some are still hidden in Timor-Leste.

The rumors of illegal groups are strongly connected with PNTL's militarization and have the potential to create competition between PNTL and F-FDTL. We have seen this tendency ever since 2005 when the Interior Minister Rogerio Lobato proposed in his budget to the government of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, allocations for purchasing ammunition. It was surprising when the newspaper Suara Timor Lorosae (STL) reported that the amount of money requested for PNTL to purchase ammunition, at the time, was US\$ 10,184,000 million.²⁰

These developments for PNTL have damaged the institutional relationship between PNTL and F-FDTL. For example, when PNTL decided to establish the Border Police Unit (UPF), some F-FDTL elements were not pleased because the tasks allocated to this Unit were no different with F-FDTL, which is mandated to defend the nation from external threats.²¹

Ever since the appointment of Longuinhos Monteiro as the PNTL General Commander, the desire for militarizing PNTL has remained continuous. Longuinhos Monteiro has been successful in establishing the red-beret Public Order Battalion (BOP) which has carried out 3 days of military training in Rairobu, Bobonaro district from 14-16 December 2009. Longuinhos Monteiro has also made attempts to add to the number of weapons in the PNTL arsenal, including semi-automatic and automatic rifles.²²

Longuinhos Monteiro's performance has been strongly criticized by the leaders of the opposition parties. Fernanda Borges, the President of Partidu Unidade Nasional (PUN) lamented that, Longuinhos Monteiro is known as someone who wanted to carry heavy machine guns, and was appointed by the Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao, because of his image as a "strong man" as a part of "a dangerous game to create a balance between the weak PNTL and the strong F-FDTL."²³

Longuinhos Monteiro's decision to lead the operation against the Ninja in Suai and Bobonaro by utilizing heavy machineguns, has also created dissatisfaction in F-FDTL

¹⁹ See the report of HAK Association on the Situation in Bobonaro and Suai. 15 February-2010. At the end, the Chairman of the National Parliament decides that the election of Municipal Chamber is cancelled and will be held in 2014.

²⁰ See STL 16-July, 2005, New Budget to Purchase *Bullets*.

²¹ Hasegawa, *Issue Paper: Weapons proliferation in Timor-Leste*, 26-10-2004.

²² Hare, *Security Sector Reform Monitor, Timor-Leste*, No. 2, May 2010.

²³ *Security Sector Reform Monitor, Timor-Leste*, No. 2, May 2010.

because it is not the job of PNTL to deal with external threats.²⁴ There is an image that Longuinhos tried to establish a “mini-army” within PNTL.²⁵

Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao has attempted to create a balance between PNTL and F-FDTL with the appointment of Longuinhos Monteiro as the PNTL General Commander, but it is the Prime Minister who is the Minister for Defense and Security, and he has not just agreed with every proposal submitted Longuinhos Monteiro. However, Longuinhos Monteiro has never given up trying to attain what he wants. The Ninja case in Bobonaro and Suai, and the illegal group in Ermera, are attempts to justify his proposals to allocate more of the budget for him to purchase more sophisticated and modern weaponry for PNTL.

Meanwhile, Jose Texeira, a member of the National Parliament (NP) from Committee B on Defense and Security has said, that the incident in Ermera is to establish a pretext for the PNTL General Commander to purchase heavy machine guns in order to maintain security in the country. Longuinhos Monteiro has already presented this idea to the Council of Ministries but was not approved, and was cancelled by the Prime Minister and the Minister for Defense and Security.²⁶

To make a connection with the political situation in the country, Francisco Branco, a member of NP from the FRETILIN party bench said, that as the Prime Minister is currently conducting a consultation process in all the districts, and will be visiting Ermera, where not everyone is happy. Generally, many people from Ermera are not pleased with the political and development processes under the leadership of the Prime Minister Xanana. Thus, the spreading of rumors about an illegal group is a trick to create a ‘security disturbance’ in order to minimize potential criticism from the people.²⁷

Other Sources Regarding the Incident in Ermera

The rumors of an illegal group in Ermera and the information provided by the PNTL General Commander is different from the reality on the ground.²⁸ Ironically, the difference in information issued by the PNTL General Commander and the Second Commander-in-Chief, Afonso de Jesus, with the information from the Ermera PNTL District Commander, Mariano Martins, shows that there is a lack of effective coordination between the three leaders. A commander should conduct a thorough investigation before issuing statements to the general public.²⁹

Our source also explained that there are weapons spread throughout Ermera, and in some other districts as well. The source said that during the 2006 crisis, the government had attempted to collect all these weapons, but was only able to collect some. Most of these weapons belonged to PNTL. In August 2009, the Timorese government, through a Joint Command Operation, launched a campaign to collect all illegal sharp and pointed

²⁴ Security Sector Reform Monitor, Timor-Leste, No. 2, May 2010.

²⁵ Interview with the source of Fundasaun Mahein, 25-05-2010.

²⁶ Jose Texeira, Committee B of the National Parliament, 26-05-2010.

²⁷ Francisco Branco, Dili. 26-05-2010.

²⁸ Interview with the source of Fundasaun Mahein, Dili, 27-05-2010.

²⁹ Interview with the source of Fundasaun Mahein, Dili, 27-05-2010.

weapons.³⁰ However, the case in Ermera shows that illegal weapons have not all been collected. According to an FM source, a house and 4 farms were burnt by an illegal group and there was shooting in Ermera on 16 May 2010.³¹ However, they could not identify where this group belongs and whether or not it is armed.³²

The group supposedly led by a former member of the 745 battalion of the Indonesian military, if it does exist, is being categorized as an illegal group with no relation to the Indonesian government. We should put this into the context that illegal infiltration into Timor-Leste, by illegal groups, does not mean they have any relationship with political elements of the Indonesian central government. Recently, the relationship between Indonesia and Timor-Leste has been very good, in particular, in the security of the border (Source of Fundasaun Mahein 27-05-2010). Although along the border of Oecusse, security still remains as a problem.

In relation to the confusing information from the PNTL Commanders, the Chairman of Parliamentary Committee B on Defense and Security, Duarte Nunes,³³ insists that since the beginning people have often said that there are weapons, but the question is, who is in possession of these weapons?³⁴

Duarte Nunes was also unhappy with the statements of the PNTL General Commander, Longuinhos Monteiro. Duarte Nunes declared that PNTL has been unprofessional in issuing information about the illegal group in Ermera district, which has caused panic in the community.³⁵

When we brought to his attention the statement of PNTL Second in Command, Afonso de Jesus, which stated that the illegal group is currently organizing itself in Fatubolo, Ermera district, Duarte Nunes rejected this by saying that the group does not exist. He then questioned, how can the group organize itself? Who is organizing and who is the leader? Where is the evidence? Since there is no concrete evidence, the rumors go on.³⁶

On the 26th of May, Duarte Nunes made a phone call to the PNTL Operational Commander, Mateus Fernandes. Mateus Fernandes said that when he talked to the people in the referred area, they said that there was no incident in their area. No shooting and no arson of any houses.³⁷

Longuinhos Monteiro attempts to create pretexts for him to have reasons for purchasing heavy machine guns to reinforce PNTL. Duarte Nunes is questioning, who Timor-Leste shall wage war with by purchasing such weapons. Is it with Indonesia? It is impossible!

³⁰ Weapons

³¹ Source of Fundasaun Mahein, Dili, 27-05-2010

³² Interview with the source of Fundasaun Mahein, Dili, 27-05-2010.

³³ Chairman of Committee B of the National Parliament

³⁴ Duarte Nunes, Dili, 4, 06, 2010.

³⁵ Duarte Nunes, Dili, 4, 06, 2010.

³⁶ Duarte Nunes, Dili, 4, 06, 2010.

³⁷ Duarte Nunes, Dili, 4, 06, 2010.

He explained that only the National Parliament can decide how much money is to be spent, including for the PNTL institution.

The Economic Aspect and National Stability

The incident in the village of Fatubolo, Ermera district also had a big impact on the local economy because the farmers felt too threatened, to go look after their plantations, coffee fields and other agriculture products. Not only does it impact the local economy, but the event in Fatubolo also affects national stability. Thus, foreign investors may withdraw themselves from investing in the country.³⁸

Social and economic aspects are also influencing the emergence of the illegal group in Ermera. Economically, although Ermera is a district with a high production of coffee, its basic infrastructure is still not taken care of. For example, bad road conditions make it difficult for the farmers to transport their agricultural products to Dili. Although, there are some companies that provide assistance in Ermera, such as Timor Global and NCBA, we are all aware, that these companies are competing to accumulate capital for themselves rather than thinking of the well-being of the farmers.

Another problem is the high rate of illiteracy. These realities are added to a lack of access to information, as well as the fact that the people in remote areas are lacking adequate information about the development process, and the progress of the country in general.

Conclusion

History shows that many post-conflict nations have faced stability problems inside the country after obtaining their independence.

In Nicaragua, Central America, the Sandinista government took power in 1979. Soon after that, there emerged a militia group called CONTRA, which established its base in the border region between Nicaragua and Honduras, and created instability in Nicaragua until they overthrew the government lead by President Daniel Ortega.³⁹

However, when we connect the above-mentioned experiences to the real situation in Timor-Leste, we can say that there has not been anyone forming militias along the border of Indonesia and Timor-Leste, and the relationship between these two countries is quite good. The situation in Timor-Leste is that; there are 'some elements' trying to create a pretext for the sake of their political interests by creating instability in the

³⁸ Arsenio Bano said these incidents are not favouring the economic growth in the country and will distract foreign investor, including the issue of drawing the pipeline to Timor-Leste. hateten eventus hirak nebe maka akontese ladun favorese kresimentu ekonomia iha rai laran no atrai investidores sira inklui mos questaua dada pipeline mai Timor-Leste. Interview with Arsenio Bano, member of the National Parliament from FRETILIN party bench and a member of Committee B on Defence and Security. Dili, 26, 05, 2010.

³⁹ Michael T. Klare & Peter Kornbluh (Ed), *Low Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties*, Pantheon Books, New York 1988, p 132.

country. As a new nation, it is expected that Timor-Leste will not repeat the black history of the above-mentioned post-conflict nations.

Recommendation of Fundasaun Mahein (FM) 1:

FM recommends to both Ministers of Defense and Security that they order an annual audit of the weapons in the armories of both PNTL and F-FDTL. This audit should be carried out through the National Parliament Commission B and should include a list of the existing inventory of weapons in both armories, and a list of those still missing.

Recommendation of FM 2:

FM recommends that, in the future, there should be training for PNTL, that focuses on Human Rights, specifically on how to treat suspects, as well as how to attend to cases in the community.

Recommendation of FM 3:

FM also acknowledges that there is a need for more adequate communication among the security institutions, and recommends the establishment of an intergrated system of sharing information which enables better coordination between PNTL members in the districts, PNTL Headquarters in Dili, and the National Intelligence Service (SNI). This type of coordination is important so that when an announcement is made by PNTL to the public, it has already been shared with and vetted by other relevant security institutions, and is based on concrete data, so there is no confusion, and we avoid the possibility of a public panic.

Recommendation of FM 4:

FM recommends that in the future the Government must give their full attention to PNTL, especially PNTL's Community Police Unit and make sure they comply with their duties and establish close links with the community in order to attend to their issues and prevent future conflicts.

Recommendation of FM 5:

FM also recommends to the government to treat the two forces, PNTL and F-FDTL, equally and avoid competition between these two forces.

Recommendation of FM 6:

FM also highly recommends that in their every day operations, PNTL show full respect to the private property of individuals in the community, including plantations and gardens, and to pet animals and livestock for which people are the owners and caretakers.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ As based on the report in the newspaper that during the Special Operation in Bobonaro, PNTL members killed 28 cows of the community

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