Ghosts in Dili:
Aviation Gaps, Scam Networks and a Test of Timor-Leste's Sovereignty

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Photo: HATUTAN.com, 2026

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Introduction

In early July 2026, a Cessna Citation 700 Longitude private jet landed at Presidente Nicolau Lobato International Airport in Dili. As is often the case, VIP charter flights regularly visit Dili carrying senior figures and prospective investors, typically passing through the airport's VIP terminal. This aircraft arrived under an approval issued by the Civil Aviation Authority of Timor-Leste (AACTL, I.P.) (Approval No. AACTL, I.P. 01/VII/04/2026), stating that its purpose was to transport VIP guests of His Excellency the President of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste.

In reality, however, the incident revealed a case of institutional manipulation, exposing vulnerabilities in Timor-Leste's border controls, inter-agency coordination and aviation governance. Within a matter of hours, what had been presented as a charter flight transporting VIP guests of the President of the Republic became a matter of national security concern after the online news outlet HATUTAN.com reported that the aircraft was in fact intended to transport three suspects linked to a scam centre case.[1]

This incident was not an isolated occurrence. Rather, it forms part of a broader pattern that has been identified by civil society organisations such as Fundasaun Mahein (FM) and by international observers, including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which have repeatedly warned of the strategic infiltration of criminal networks through financial, logistical and aviation channels.[2]

This report is based on documentary analysis of publicly available sources, including local and international media reports, official UNODC publications, legislative and regulatory documents and FM's own publications. The analysis adopts a case study approach, informed by an institutional perspective and the study of transnational organised crime. The principal limitations of the report are the restricted access to classified documents and the absence of interviews with key actors involved in the events discussed.

A Ghost Flight with Falsified Documents

The aircraft, registered in Indonesia and chartered from J Trans, departed from Halim Perdanakusuma Airport in Jakarta and arrived in Dili on 1 July 2026. The official submission accompanying the flight was approved by the Civil Aviation Authority of Timor-Leste (AACTL, I.P.), stating that the aircraft was transporting VIP guests of His Excellency the President of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste.

After media reports emerged regarding the true purpose of the flight, President José Ramos-Horta publicly denied having any knowledge of it, stating that his name had been used to obtain the necessary authorisation. The President called for legal action against those responsible for the falsification and instructed that any state officials involved should be immediately suspended from their duties.[3] The President immediately and unequivocally called for a criminal investigation and disciplinary action against any state officials who had facilitated or ignored the irregularities. This response underscored both the seriousness of the

[1] HATUTAN.com, 2 July 2026.
[2] UNODC, September 2025.
[3] RAFA.TL, 2 July 2026.

alleged violation and the fragility of the institutional safeguards that were intended to prevent such abuses.

Based on the information currently available, the principal actors involved in approving the private flight and facilitating the movement of individuals suspected of links to the scam call centre operation in Tibar, Liquiçá, together with their respective roles, are summarised below.

Actor	Role	Response
AACTL, I.P. officials	Approved the flight on the basis of falsified documentation	AACTL stated that it acted solely in accordance with the official authorisation it received.
Migration Service	Processed the passengers' entry and departure, including passport stamping	Argued that its mandate was limited to immigration processing.
Airport Security	Responsible for airport security and inspections	Cited procedural limitations and limited inter-agency coordination.

Source: Fundasaun Mahein research findings, 2026.

The use of a falsified document invoking the name of the Head of State suggests that transnational organised criminal networks operate through local "hubs"—actors within state institutions who provide access, facilitate operations and offer institutional cover. This model is comparable to the regulatory capture identified in Sihanoukville (Cambodia) and Myawaddy (Myanmar), where falsified documentation and official authorisations have become important instruments for facilitating illegal activities.[4]

FM's analysis emphasises that incidents involving the misuse of a Head of State's name are not unique to Timor-Leste but occur in many countries. However, in many jurisdictions, established state systems and institutional safeguards are specifically designed to prevent or strictly control the unauthorised use of the names of senior state officials, including both the Head of State and the Head of Government.

From this perspective, FM argues that the repeated misuse of the Head of State's name reflects institutional shortcomings rather than isolated acts of individual misconduct. Addressing this issue therefore requires the development of a strong and responsive state system capable of preventing, monitoring and sanctioning such practices.

Accordingly, FM calls on the Government of Timor-Leste to establish and strengthen appropriate legal and administrative mechanisms to effectively prevent the unauthorised use of the Head of State's name for any purpose.

Passengers and Links to Scam Networks

Three Indonesian nationals were associated with the flight. They had already entered Timor-Leste under circumstances that subsequently attracted significant attention from the authorities. Investigators suspected that the three individuals were connected to the scam call centre operation in Tibar, Liquiçá, where 61 Indonesian nationals had been arrested prior to the incident.

Despite these suspicions, the three individuals were authorised to leave Timor-Leste on commercial flights the following morning. Meanwhile, the private jet intended to transport them

[4] UNODC, September 2025.

remained parked at Presidente Nicolau Lobato International Airport in Dili. This created an operational disconnect that diverted the attention of the authorities: while the aircraft remained at the airport, its passengers departed through a separate channel. This is one of the operational methods frequently employed by transnational organised criminal groups to divert the attention of security authorities.

According to the official explanation, the Migration Service processed the passengers' departure by stamping their passports and allowing them to leave the country. The Migration Service argued that its mandate was limited to processing entry and departure formalities and did not extend to investigating the purpose of travel or possible criminal affiliations.[5] Airport authorities likewise pointed to procedural limitations and limited coordination between institutions.

This fragmentation of responsibilities is fundamental to understanding the systemic weakness exposed by the incident. No single institution possessed a complete operational picture of who these three individuals were, why they were in Timor-Leste, or how they were able to leave the country so quickly despite suspicions regarding their links to the scam call centre operation.

In its September 2025 assessment, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) identified the use of criminal foreign direct investment (criminal FDI) as a means through which transnational organised crime is seeking to establish itself in Timor-Leste. The report notes that, in Cambodia, networks such as the 14K Triad and Huione Guarantee have provided infrastructure to facilitate large-scale fraud operations. In relation to Timor-Leste, the UNODC identified several areas of concern, including:

- Company A, which was designated to lead the National Digital Identity Project, creating potential risks regarding access to sensitive government data;
- the Oecusse Digital Centre (ODC), a free-zone project with the potential to develop into a "crime haven" similar to Sihanoukville;
- Hotel A in RAEOA, identified as a location linked to scam operations; and
- proposed citizenship-by-investment schemes, which could be used to obtain Timorese passports.[6]

Whether these networks are directly connected to the private jet incident in Dili remains a matter for further investigation. Nevertheless, the operational patterns are similar, including the use of shell companies, professional service providers and multiple passports.

The involvement of a PNTL officer in facilitating firearms training for foreign nationals in the September 2025 "Chinese billionaire investor" case, together with the misuse of the President of the Republic's name to obtain flight authorisation, suggests that transnational organised criminal networks operate through local "hubs"—individuals within state institutions who provide access, protection and institutional cover.

[5] HATUTAN.com, 3 July 2026.
[6] UNODC, September 2025.

The "Ghost Jet" and Institutional Fragmentation

The aircraft subsequently became known in local media as the "ghost jet" (*jet siluman* or *ghost aircraft*)—a term reflecting the uncertainty surrounding its true purpose and the apparent absence of effective oversight. Flight-tracking data confirmed its rapid movement between Jakarta and Dili, arriving at approximately 5:15 p.m. on 1 July and departing again within 24 hours.

Airport authorities stated that they had acted solely in accordance with formal instructions received through official aviation channels. The Civil Aviation Authority of Timor-Leste (AACTL) emphasised that it did not independently verify the legitimacy of the passengers' stated purpose of travel, but instead focused on operational matters such as approving the aircraft's landing and departure.[7]

This procedural compartmentalisation illustrates a structural vulnerability. Each institution—including airport operators, the Migration Service and the security services—operates within a narrowly defined mandate without an integrated mechanism for sharing information. In such a system, falsified documentation or manipulated diplomatic claims can pass through multiple control points without triggering a coordinated institutional response.

The presence of the "ghost jet" during a high-profile diplomatic visit further complicated the situation. During the same period, the Prime Minister of Singapore was conducting an official visit to Dili, arriving by private aircraft. Although the "ghost jet" had no connection to that visit, misleading information circulated claiming that it formed part of the Singaporean Prime Minister's advance team.

This reflects a common operating method of transnational organised criminal networks: exploiting opportunities created by high-profile diplomatic visits, spreading false information—such as claims that the aircraft was carrying the Singaporean Prime Minister's advance team—and invoking the names of senior public figures, in this case by claiming that the flight was transporting "VIP guests of the President of the Republic."

A Broader Pattern in the Exploitation of Private Aviation

The incident in July 2026 should not be regarded as an isolated anomaly. Rather, it forms part of a growing body of evidence indicating that private aviation has repeatedly been used as a logistical platform for high-risk movements into Timor-Leste.

In October 2025, HATUTAN.com reported that Chinese billionaire investors arrived in Timor-Leste aboard a Bombardier Global Express private jet and were received through the VVIP terminal with only minimal security screening.[8] In some cases, standard airport security procedures—including baggage inspections—were reportedly overlooked because the passengers' status was considered more important than normal security rules and procedures.

[7] HATUTAN.com, 3 July 2026.

[8] HATUTAN.COM, 2 October 2025.

Two Chinese billionaires holding firearms in Liquiçá, September 2025

Even more concerning was a separate incident involving two Chinese billionaire investors who received firearms training in Liquiçá in September 2025. According to HATUTAN.com, the foreign nationals who undertook the firearms training had arrived in Timor-Leste aboard a Bombardier Global Express private jet.[9] The training was facilitated by a member of PNTL's Personal Security Company (*Companhia de Segurança Pessoal* – CSP).

The CSP is the specialised unit of PNTL responsible for providing close protection to senior state officials. The CSP officer who facilitated the firearms training was the personal security commander assigned to the Director-General of Timor-Leste's National Strategic Intelligence Service (SNIE), Longuinhos Monteiro.

The CSP member who facilitated the firearms training was subsequently suspended by PNTL, and the case was referred to the Public Prosecution Service.[10] While the investigation was still ongoing, the two businessmen who had become suspects in the case attempted to leave Timor-Leste through Dili Airport in November 2025. They were intercepted and detained by the security authorities after approximately 72 hours.[11]

Cases such as these raise serious questions about how foreign nationals have been able to gain access to sensitive security environments.

One response to these concerns can be found in *A Manifesto to Defend Timor-Leste,* published by Minister Agio Pereira on his Facebook account. In the manifesto, he argued that criminal actors had already infiltrated the Timorese state and that individuals occupying the highest levels of government were prepared to "sell the honour of the nation."

Comparative Case Studies: Nigeria, Cambodia, Vanuatu and Fiji

a) Nigeria: Major Financial Losses from Illegal Private Jet Operations

[9] Ibid.

[10] RAFA.TL, 2 October 2025.

[11] Timor Post, 19 November 2025.

Nigeria has experienced substantial financial losses as a result of illegal private charter operations. The Nigerian Government estimates that regulatory weaknesses have resulted in losses of approximately ₦120 billion (around US$80 million) over the past decade. Loopholes in the Permit for Non-Commercial Flight (PNCF) system have enabled operators to use private aircraft for illegal commercial charter services. Foreign-registered aircraft have also contributed to the problem, as local authorities have been unable to monitor their operations effectively.

Criminal activity has been particularly prevalent at VIP aviation facilities. Reports indicate that approximately 90 per cent of criminal activity detected at Abuja's General Aviation Terminal (GAT)—including money laundering, drug trafficking and the movement of fugitives—has occurred through this facility. Nigeria's Minister of Aviation, Festus Keyamo, stated that these operations are not merely a financial issue but also a matter of national security. Because such flights cannot be effectively tracked, they facilitate money laundering, drug and human trafficking and illegal cross-border movements.[12]

The reforms recommended in Nigeria include strengthening civil aviation regulation, improving background verification systems, enhancing cooperation between government agencies and introducing more stringent penalties for violations. Nigeria's experience demonstrates that weaknesses in private charter regulation can create a "safe haven" for organised crime.

b) Cambodia: Special Economic Zones as "Crime Havens"

The UNODC's April 2025 report identifies Cambodia as one of the world's largest cybercrime hubs. Sihanoukville and other areas containing Special Economic Zones (SEZs) have become "safe havens" for scam centres, illegal casinos and trafficking operations. The Huione Guarantee platform processed approximately US$24 billion in cryptocurrency transactions while providing services to organised criminal groups. The 14K Triad and other criminal organisations have been involved in scam operations in which victims from numerous countries were trafficked and forced to commit fraud.[13]

The report highlights an important lesson for Timor-Leste. The proposed Oecusse Digital Centre (ODC) faced the risk of developing into a situation similar to Sihanoukville if not subject to effective regulation, although the Government has since suspended the project. Timor-Leste should ensure that any future Special Economic Zones are governed by clear regulatory frameworks and robust monitoring mechanisms.[14]

c) Vanuatu and Fiji: Citizenship-by-Investment Programmes and Emerging Vulnerabilities

Vanuatu operates a Citizenship-by-Investment (CBI) programme that has been exploited to obtain passports quickly. One prominent example involved Andrew Tate, who reportedly acquired Vanuatu citizenship through an investment of US$130,000 before his arrest in Romania.[15] In 2024, the European Union revoked Vanuatu's visa-free access to the Schengen Area because of concerns over abuse of the programme.

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[12] The Cable, 5 March 2025.
[13] UNODC, April 2025.
[14] UNODC, September 2025.
[15] BBC News, 4 June 2025.

Fiji, meanwhile, faces limited capacity to monitor private aviation and maintain effective aviation security.[16] More broadly, the Pacific region is increasingly becoming a new frontier for transnational organised crime.

Timor-Leste should therefore avoid establishing citizenship-by-investment programmes without clear regulatory safeguards, invest in stronger aviation monitoring and enforcement capacity and strengthen regional cooperation to address emerging transnational criminal threats.

These case studies demonstrate that the challenges facing Timor-Leste are not unique but form part of a broader global pattern. Timor-Leste has an opportunity to learn from both the mistakes and experiences of other countries by implementing preventive measures before similar problems become more deeply entrenched. With the support of its international development partners, Timor-Leste can avoid repeating the experiences of Nigeria, Cambodia, Vanuatu and Fiji.

Structural Vulnerabilities in Governance and Security

The incidents discussed above reveal systemic vulnerabilities across multiple layers of governance in Timor-Leste. These are not merely administrative failures but reflect deeper institutional weaknesses.

First, the integrity of official documentation is seriously weakened, allowing falsified diplomatic or presidential references to influence decisions on aviation authorisations. A document describing the passengers as "VIP guests of the President" was approved without independent verification, indicating that the authorisation process relied largely on assumptions rather than rigorous verification procedures.

Second, institutional fragmentation prevents coordinated risk assessment between the immigration authorities, the Civil Aviation Authority and law enforcement agencies. AACTL focuses on aviation logistics, the Migration Service is responsible for processing entry and departure and PNTL concentrates on physical security. Each institution operates independently within a narrow mandate, without an effective mechanism for sharing information.

When the private jet landed and the three passengers later departed separately on commercial flights, no single institution possessed a complete operational picture of the situation. One agency knew the aircraft had arrived; another knew the passengers had departed; another knew they were suspected of links to criminal activity—but none coordinated effectively with the others. As a result, the three passengers were able to receive exit stamps in their passports and leave the country with relative ease, despite suspicions regarding their connections to the scam centre.

Third, VIP protection protocols can override normal security procedures, weakening physical inspection regimes. In some cases, "VIP" status has been used as a form of cover to avoid baggage and document inspections. The earlier case involving Chinese billionaire investors who received firearms training with members of PNTL in Liquiçá demonstrates how security procedures can break down when individuals are regarded as VIPs.

[16] ABC News, 3 June 2025.

These vulnerabilities are not simply administrative shortcomings; they have important strategic implications. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has observed that small states experiencing rapid growth in foreign investment, while possessing limited law enforcement capacity, can become attractive entry points for transnational organised crime. Timor-Leste, with its developing economy and still-evolving regulatory framework, therefore represents a potential target for organised criminal groups.

The scam centre operation in Tibar, the firearms training incident and the "ghost jet" case all point to a common pattern: transnational organised crime exploits weak systems not primarily through force, but by manipulating institutional weaknesses and regulatory gaps. This is what the UNODC describes as "criminal foreign direct investment (criminal FDI)"—criminal investment entering through legal or semi-legal channels.

Institutional fragmentation also limits the state's ability to detect threats at an early stage. When AACTL does not verify the purpose of a flight, the Migration Service does not investigate possible criminal links and PNTL does not coordinate with either institution, space is created for criminal actors to operate with relative impunity.

This is what FM has previously described as institutional permeability: a gradual process through which state systems are utilised—or circumvented—by criminal actors operating through legitimate administrative channels. As emphasised in the UNODC assessment, small states experiencing increasing investment while possessing limited institutional capacity face a significant risk of becoming hubs for transnational organised crime unless structural reforms are undertaken.

The private jet incident therefore represents a serious test of Timor-Leste's sovereignty, demonstrating that the country's security architecture requires fundamental reform if it is to prevent the continued exploitation of institutional weaknesses.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The private aircraft incident in early July 2026 serves as a diagnostic case study of how transnational criminal networks can exploit procedural gaps within the governance systems of small states. It demonstrates that modern organised crime does not always depend on force or corruption alone. Rather, it can operate through the manipulation of official documentation, jurisdictional fragmentation and cumbersome administrative procedures.

The involvement of individuals linked to scam operations, the misuse of presidential authority and the rapid departure of suspects from the country point to the coordinated exploitation of systemic weaknesses rather than a series of isolated errors. As FM has repeatedly emphasised, the principal security challenge facing Timor-Leste is not a conventional military threat but institutional permeability—a situation in which state systems are gradually utilised or circumvented by criminal actors operating through legal and semi-legal channels.

Accordingly, this report proposes the following policy recommendations.

1. Short-term Recommendations (0–6 months)

No.	Recommendation	Responsible Institution(s)	Success Indicator
1	Conduct a comprehensive audit of all charter flight authorisations issued during the previous 12 months, including all supporting documentation and justifications.	AACTL, I.P.; Ministry of Transport and Communications	Audit report published within 3 months
2	Suspend authorisations for charter operators not registered in Timor-Leste (e.g. J Trans).	AACTL, I.P.	Updated register of authorised operators
3	Conduct joint training for the Migration Service, PNTL and AACTL on the detection of falsified documents and the verification of official documentation.	PNTL; Migration Service; AACTL; UNODC	Training completed within 2 months
4	Introduce mandatory verification of the stated purpose of travel for all VIP passengers through direct confirmation with the institution being referenced.	Airport Security; SNIE; Migration Service	New procedures implemented
5	Conduct criminal investigations into any state officials who facilitated or approved the irregularities (AACTL, Migration Service and Airport Security).	Public Prosecution Service; PNTL/PCIC	Investigations completed within 6 months
6	Establish a real-time notification system between the airport and security authorities for all charter flights.	AACTL; PNTL; SNIE	System operational within 3 months
7	Reform the security sector to reduce institutional fragmentation and strengthen the Inter-Ministerial Security Commission.	Government / Prime Minister	Reform plan implemented within 6 months

2. Medium-term Recommendations (6–12 months)

No.	Recommendation	Responsible Institution(s)	Success Indicator
8	Introduce a digital document verification system using certified digital signatures for all official flight authorisations.	AACTL; Ministry of Transport and Communications; Ministry of Justice; SNIE	System operational within 12 months
9	Establish an information-sharing platform linking the Migration Service, PNTL, intelligence agencies and aviation authorities, including passenger data.	PNTL; SNIE; Migration Service; AACTL	Platform operational within 12 months
10	Strengthen specialised transnational organised crime units within PNTL and PCIC, including enhanced financial investigation capacity.	PNTL; PCIC; bilateral and multilateral partners, including UNODC	Specialised unit operational within 12 months
11	Strengthen bilateral cooperation with Indonesia and other countries on charter passenger	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation; Ministry	Memoranda of Understanding

	information and intelligence sharing.	of Transport and Communications; SNIE	signed within 12 months
12	Review the regulatory framework governing charter flights, including document verification requirements and travel justification criteria.	AACTL; Ministry of Transport and Communications	Revised regulations implemented within 12 months

3. Long-term Recommendations (18–36 months)

No.	Recommendation	Responsible Institution(s)	Success Indicator
13	Introduce an **Advance Passenger Information (API)** system for all charter flights, including automated passenger screening.	AACTL; Migration Service; SNIE	API system operational within 36 months
14	Develop an integrated system linking aviation records, immigration databases and intelligence agencies using shared passenger information.	Ministry of Transport and Communications; Ministry of the Interior; SNIE	Integrated system fully operational within 36 months

The "ghost jet" has departed. The vulnerabilities it exposed, however, remain. The critical question is whether this incident will lead to meaningful structural reform, or whether it will become yet another precedent absorbed into a system where institutional vulnerabilities have become normalised.

In this sense, the aircraft was more than simply a means of transport. It became a serious test of Timor-Leste's sovereignty—one that requires a collective response from the Government, civil society and international partners.

The vulnerabilities exposed by this incident will persist unless concrete action is taken. Timor-Leste now faces a choice: it can continue with a system that remains vulnerable, allowing the risks to grow, or it can treat this incident as a wake-up call and undertake the structural reforms that are now required.

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