



## **The Timor-Leste National Police: Old and New Problems** by Loro Horta

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During the 2006 political crisis in Timor-Leste, the Timorese National Police (PNTL) performed the worst among the country's security forces. With its men fleeing their post with weapons and uniforms, the entire force of 3,000 nearly collapsed. In the capital city of Dili, only 10 of a 400-man force reported for duty at police headquarters. Even so-called elite units such as the UIR (rapid reaction unit) and the URP (jungle police) deserted their posts. More than two years after the crisis and hundreds of UN advisors and countless reports later, the situation seems to have improved very little.

The international advisors, with very few exceptions, seem to misunderstand the essence of the problem, focusing instead on secondary aspects such as doctrine, better training and salaries, and logistic and administrative reforms. While these are no doubt essential for the functioning of any police force, they do not address the endemic problems facing the PNTL. The main problem with the PNTL is that from the beginning, it has suffered a legitimacy crisis. The PNTL was and still is dominated by many former officers from the Indonesia police and elements widely known to favor integration with Indonesia. The presence of large numbers of former Indonesian police officers has divided the police into two opposing factions, the so-called *nacionalistas* (nationalists) and the autonomists (pro autonomy within Indonesia).

Political rivalry between Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao and the then ruling party FRETILIN, headed by Mari Alkatiri, further complicated matters. Gusmao saw the police force as a counterweight to the Timorese military (FDTL), which was viewed as being pro FRETILIN, and, with UN support, filled the ranks of the PNTL with autonomists and former Indonesian officers. Paulo Martins, the PNTL commander until the 2006 crisis, was a former Indonesian police colonel and was appointed to the post at the insistence of Gusmao, who was supported by the UN.

In addition to former Indonesian officers and autonomists, the PNTL has a large number of outright criminals: at least 16 officers have been accused of rape and other serious crimes. In the eyes of the Timorese, the police cannot be trusted. Therefore, restoring the legitimacy of the PNTL should be the top priority of the state and the international community. This can only be done by a complete restructuring of the force and the creation of a new concept of policing suitable to East Timor and not some transplanted model from Europe or

Australia that has no chance of succeeding in East Timor society.

The restructuring of the PNTL does not require the complete termination of the force. The political and social consequences of firing all 3,000 officers would far outweigh the benefits of any such a move. Those officers accused of serious offenses such as rape and banditry should be immediately suspended. Over the next five years, a gradual process of retiring former Indonesian officers should be pursued and officers without the necessary educational background should be eased out. Meanwhile, new and more qualified personnel would be introduced. This phased approach would allow for a relatively safe and systematic elimination of the less favorable elements of PNTL. For this process to move forward, there needs to be strong political will and a generous financial commitment from the Timorese state and society. With the exception of the criminal elements in the first group, those being eliminated should be compensated for their years of service and should not be dismissed in a way that marginalizes them in society.

Effective organizational reforms of the PNTL must also be initiated, but serious reform has been excruciatingly slow. The current government seems to be in a hurry to increase its numbers with an additional 200 officers admitted in the past year alone. This is taking place in a legal vacuum and without any serious consideration of the moral and technical qualifications of the new members. To this day there are no rules or regulations concerning basic issues such as a disciplinary code, promotion and retirement, and the relationship between the police and society.

Another problem facing the PNTL is the existence of "special units" that answer to individual political figures rather than the police commander. There is a recently created 120-man Task Force handpicked by the prime minister and the URP, a heavily armed unit created during the FRETILIN government as a private army for disgraced former Interior Minister Rogerio Lobato. The creation of these new units alongside existing ones that were once bitter enemies has made the PNTL a highly divided institution that is easily manipulated for political gain.

To be fair, some positive steps are being taken to address some of these issues. Plans to abolish the URP and merge its members into the Task Force and UIR and remove less desirable elements from the force are being developed. The creation of a joint headquarters and training center for the military and police could go a long way to alleviate the tensions between the PNTL and the FDTL.

The joint FDTL and PNTL operation for the capture of the renegade soldiers who attacked President Ramos Horta and Prime Minister Gusmao in February 2008 was hailed as a great success. It shows that by eliminating political

interference and making necessary reforms, the East Timorese security forces can be effective and reliable. Now, the entire mission and conceptual framework of the PNTL should be reformulated to better suit local realities. Perhaps a national police force modeled on the paramilitary forces of some southern European countries like the French Gendarme, Spanish Guardia Civil, or the now widely respected Timorese Portuguese Republican National Guard (GNR) should be considered. The current levels of violence prevalent in Timor make the concept of a pure community police approach unrealistic.

The PNTL remains a demoralized and divided force with many of its worst elements still in positions of power. Allowing the current situation to persist may have dire consequences for the fledging nation and its neighbors. The weakness of the PNTL and the complex relation with the FDTL could erupt into violence once more and turn Timor into a failed state, forcing further commitments from neighboring countries such as Australia. The weakness of the PNTL has also led to the rise of organized crime: human trafficking and the trade in amphetamines are becoming serious problems.

The international community could assist Timor-Leste address these problems in several ways. Financial support to the human rights commissioner, who is paid a very high salary but given a budget of just \$500,000 (which is lower the capital's city council budget for garbage collection) would help facilitate the process of eliminating undesirable elements from the force. Technical and financial assistance for the underfunded Commission B of the national Parliament charged with supervising the security sector is needed to initiate reforms. The promotion of confidence building measures such as the workshop hosted by the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Honolulu in early September to discuss security sector reform in Timor-Leste, which was attended by Timorese from all political parties should be encouraged. Finally, aid in the form of training for new police officers such as the assistance given by the U.S. to the police academy will also help.