

Small arms remain ‘triggers’ for Timorese violence despite control efforts: new report

DILI, 6 NOVEMBER — In spite of recent efforts to collect and destroy them, military and civilian-style small arms continue to act as triggers for violence in Timorese communities, according to a new report released today. Small arms routinely find their way into civilian hands through leakage from state weapons stockpiles. They are often intentionally distributed via patronage networks, the report finds, yet routine weapons management measures have yet to be effectively implemented.

According to the report, a comparatively small number of small arms repeatedly enabled and exacerbated communal violence over the last decade, particularly in 1999 and again in 2006. Today, a modest number of modern and colonial-era weapons remain dispersed among a wide range of civilian groups, including gangs, martial arts groups, and veterans movements. In addition to manufactured firearms, craft-made arms (*rakitans*), ammunition, and grenades present significant challenges to stability.

In the wake of the February 2008 attack on the President and Prime Minister, the Timorese government has adopted a multi-pronged approach to controlling arms. It has applied physical pressure (Operation Halibur), voluntary measures such as arms collection (Operation Kilat), and pursued a new legislative framework. But security forces have yet to institute standardized weapons registration policies, regular auditing, or increased penalties for leakage and theft. Without such measures, the report finds, ‘the security sector will continue act as a potential conduit of arms from legal to illegal weapons holders.’

‘*Dealing with the kilat*’, published today by Austcare and the Small Arms Survey, reviews the role of small arms in recent Timorese history, finding that the availability of small arms—and the motivations for using them—have evolved over time. It reports that:

- The presence or rapid influx of small arms into Timorese society has triggered periodic but nevertheless widespread violence.
- Since the 1970s, and especially in the 1990s, weapons leakage from state stockpiles and the intentional arming of civilians by security forces have left a pool of weapons that are unlikely ever to be completely recovered.
- Although small arms and light weapons availability is not new, high levels of militarization in civilian society is a comparatively new phenomenon.
- The use of small arms has changed over time from repression and insurrection to household defence, gang-related predation, and for intimidation.
- New transfers of arms are comparatively rare, but existing public stockpiles and patronage-led diffusion constitutes the largest source of new weapons in the country.

The report is the first in a series of *Issue Briefs* from the Timore-Leste Armed Violence Assessment (TLAVA), an independent research project overseen by Austcare and the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey. Working with public and non-governmental partners, the project promotes research 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. More *Issue Briefs* will be published in the coming months.

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