

**The Secretary of State for the Council of Ministers and
Official Spokesperson for the Government of Timor-Leste
Ágio Pereira**



**May 3, 2010
Dili, Timor-Leste**

Media gets it wrong on gangs and security

Statement by Secretary of State Ágio Pereira

It is widely known Timor-Leste has one of the lowest crime rates per capita in the world. By January, 2010, the weekly reported incidents of crime reduced from 97 to 87 and serious crimes had been reduced by one-third. Since 2007, Timor-Leste has been praised for consolidating security, implementing social recovery programs for the most vulnerable and spurring economic growth which has ranked Timor-Leste as one of the ten fastest growing economies in the world.

The Secretary-General on the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste stated in January 2010, "Timor-Leste is safer and more stable today than three years ago. Numbers of illegal weapons are low and crime rates have been relatively low. No recent cases of large-scale unrest in Díli or the districts have been recorded."

On April 22, 2010 the UN Police Commissioner Luis Miguel Carrilho told the UN news centre "Timor-Leste is now a safe country with a low crime rate. The restaurants in the capital and most populous city, Dili, are bustling, and you can see people enjoying their daily routines."

According to all reports, the gradual transfer from UNPol to the PNTL (Policia Nacional de Timor-Leste) has been successful with the UN reporting "no measurable increases in crime rates reported in districts where the national police, the Policia Nacional de Timor-Leste (PNTL) had resumed primary policing responsibilities."

James Scambary, a researcher residing in Australia, quoted recently in media reports as an expert on Timor-Leste, tells a different story. On March 31st in an essay for Inside Story he reports "Fighting, sporadic but at times intense, sometimes involving over 300 people at a time, is taking place in eight neighborhoods across the city (DILI)." (no sources quoted)

Scambary's piece fuelled two more media reports; **Mean Streets**; *The Australian*, April 17, 2010 and **Why East Timor has declared war on Ninjas**, *Time Magazine* April 22, 2010. All three pieces contained no current statistics, or official comment provided by either Government officials or international authorities on the ground in Timor-Leste.

According to Scambary, "Disputes are violently enacted by the different factions of some fifteen martial arts groups, which between them have an estimated 90,000 members. The national, mass nature of these groups has made them a destructive force in Timorese society, and their conflicts are again spreading."

His statement not only contradicts current security reports from Timor-Leste and the overall nature and definition of Timor-Leste "gangs" but his own field research and those of his sources.

In 2006, Mr. Scambary was commissioned by AusAID to do a one month, in-country survey: **A Survey of gangs and youth groups in Dili, Timor-Leste**. In a 27 page

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paper, he bases conclusions on interviews with 26 groups, eight bibliographic sources, all references dated between 1999 and 2006, one of which is a 2005 World Bank report, **Timor-Leste: Youth Social Analysis Mapping and Youth Institutional Assessment** (Ostergaard 2005).

Ms. Ostergaard derived her data from interviews with **six** groups. Her conclusions:

*‘There are some 15-20 martial arts groups. ...The number of registered members is probably around 20.000. Estimates to the number of non-registered members is much larger, above 90.000, which compared to the total number of youth, men and women, being about 230.000, indicates that probably some 70% of the young men are active in an martial arts group. **People interviewed say that all young men are member of a group; it is part of the identity of being a Timorese man,**’*

*‘Most of the organisations were active during the resistance movement, and self-defence art was part of the strategy to fight the Indonesian occupation. **Since independence, there has been a need to redefine the role of self-defence to become purely a sport activity. The organisations have managed this to different extent, but among those met with, there was a great concern to focus on sports, on formal tournaments, international competitions and recognition, and to avoid being part of the political system as this may prevent participation in international competitions.** Only one of the organisations, Kmanek Oan Rai Klaran (KORK) is actively affiliated with the ruling political party Fretilin. This is the only organisation not having an international relation and model, as it is trying to establish a national self-defence art.’*

Scamبارy’s key findings in **A Survey of gangs and youth groups in Dili, Timor-Leste** support Ostergaard’s conclusions:

‘The existence of hundreds of different bairro (village) based youth groups, all attempting in different but positive ways to engage and unify their communities through collective, socially oriented activities. These groups are essentially voluntary, community based civil society organizations, and represent important building blocks for future reconciliation and reconstruction programs, and as vital points of engagement with marginalized youth ’

‘As this study found, it’s impossible to generalise about these groups, which comprise a broad spectrum from small, informal groups of young males who mostly just play guitar and drink, highly cohesive, organised youth groups with coherent objectives and a range of sporting and civic activities, to large organised, ethnically based criminal gangs.’

‘On the threat of violence Scamبارy writes:

‘These claims of non-involvement in the violence seemed genuine, as of all groups interviewed, only three had a bad reputation in the neighbourhood, and possibly only one of these groups could be said to be involved as a group. Without a more thorough investigation, it could be only be concluded that all of some groups, and some of all groups were guilty of involvement in the current violence’

Mr. Scamبارy’s statement is ambiguous and not significantly based on empirical data or comprehensive statistics. All the data presented in 2010 references information collected four to five years prior. Both studies (Scamبارy and Ostergaard) do not reflect the information presented in the three articles March 31st, April 17th and April 22nd.

In 2009, a second publication was issued: **Groups Gangs and Armed Violence**, which was **“based on the research conducted by James Scamبارy, who has conducted research on Timorese gangs since 2006.”**

The authors note *"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. 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."*

Scamبارy, a representative of the Asia Action group and a representative from HAK, were the only quoted participants in the aforementioned articles; a very well coordinated agenda presented to the press by the three parties.

It should be noted, Daily Security briefings are readily available and information can be sourced through the Government, the relevant Government Ministers, the United Nations Mission in Timor-Leste, UnPol and the many other international partners who are involved in monitoring the overall security and progress of nation. The question still remains why three writers preferred to omit the central sources of real time and accurate information.

Secretary of State Ágio Pereira stated "Timor-Leste has become accustomed to weak external analysis; we now have over 3,635 reports written by international actors with conflicting data, outdated sources, and opinion presented as fact.'

'We are also aware that people and organizations have an agenda to promote to serve their own self interest, to justify their continued work in country or perhaps to promote a third party agenda whose best interests would be served to imply that Timor-Leste poses sovereign risk; sadly, this does not reflect the State of the nation in May 2010. Commentary such as this does not serve the interest of the State or the people of Timor-Leste nor does it contribute to the development of our nation which should be the ultimate purpose of all those involved in the development process.'

'The last series of articles was deeply offensive to our nation, our Government, the institutions of the State, the people of Timor-Leste and all the international actors who have positively contributed and participated in consolidating peace and stability. By excluding our participation in the analysis, what was left was a grossly misleading and inaccurate portrayal of the state of the nation.'" ENDS

For More Information Please Contact:

Ágio Pereira +670 723 0011

E-mail:

agiopereira@cdm.gov.tl

or

govtlmedia@gmail.com

Website:

www.timor-leste.gov.tl