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Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia: Timor-Leste as a Staging Point

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Timor-Leste is fast becoming a staging point for illegal migrants aiming to get into Australia. How will Dili handle this new problem?

ON 18 OCTOBER, Malaysian marine police detained a group of 18 Afghan illegal migrants and two Indonesian traffickers. The human cargo was destined for Indonesia and then to fragile Timor-Leste from where the illegals were to enter Australia.

The incident was just the latest in a growing trend in human trafficking targeted at Australia. For the first time Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste, was emerging as the launching point for the final move into Australia. Dili has now become a part of the smuggling network. For the past two years Timor has been fast growing into a major hub for people smugglers and other illegal criminal activities such as drug trafficking. Indonesian criminal gangs, Chinese triads and other Southeast Asian networks are finding the island a rather attractive location to conduct their activities.

The 2006 political-military crisis that saw a bloody confrontation between Timorese security forces led to the collapse of the national police and the country's newly-created and inexperienced intelligence service. Despite hundreds of advisors and countless equipment acquisitions, the Timorese national police, PNTL, remains a highly demoralised force, riddled with corruption. The appointment as police commissioner of Lomguinhos Monteiro, a judge tainted with dubious links to the Indonesian occupiers during the pre-independence period, has only made matters worse. The country's intelligence agency is being rebuilt after suffering from factionalism and lack of funding.

The Timorese police is a highly-factionalised force and the appointment of Monteiro may prove a fatal error. The Baucau police commander, the country's second largest city, has on various occasions refused to carry out the commissioner's orders, insisting that he will not be ordered by a civilian. Timor seems to have the best police commander and police force that a criminal could hope for.

Dangerous New World

In July 2008 Silk Air started direct flights from Singapore to Dili. The inaugural flight was greeted with jubilation, with the Timorese President declaring “a link to Singapore is a link to Asia and the world, we are no longer isolated”. No doubt that a direct link to Singapore is of strategic importance for the country. It reduces the small state’s dependence on dubious Indonesian airlines and over-priced Australian carriers and should therefore be maintained at all cost.

However, with the link to the world also come some problems -- the first illegal migrants bound for Australia began to land in Dili. During the first year of the Singapore-Dili flight, there were nearly a hundred transit passengers arriving from Singapore who were deported or detained by the Timorese authorities, amongst them Afghanis, Sri Lankans, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Nigerians. On one occasion alone 21 people were detained in one flight. Confronted with this torrent of illegal entries, Dili turned to Singapore for help. The problem has been addressed through stricter controls and efficient work on the part of the Singapore authorities which quickly reduced the flow to a trickle.

Turning to the Sea

Faced with an efficient police force on the Singapore side and a more attentive Timorese government to the problem, smugglers have now turned to the sea. They try to enter Timor via Indonesia’s nearby islands or through its long and rugged land border with Timor.

The move to the sea and the mountainous land border was a natural one; Timor has 873 kilometers of coast and only two aging patrol vessels to guard its sea, making it fairly easy for people smugglers to unload their illegal cargo. The land border is very porous and patrolled by an under-equipped police force. Once in Timor the illegal migrants attempt to enter Australia that lies 300 nautical miles south either by sea or air.

People smugglers are not the only ones finding Timor a good place to settle. Triads from the former Portuguese enclave of Macau are running a growing amphetamine trade with two drug laboratories reportedly operating in the Timorese capital. Prostitution is another area from which criminal elements are profiting. An estimated 200 foreign sex workers from Indonesia, China, Thailand, and the Philippines are believed to be in the country.

As an American dollar-based economy, Timor has also attracted small-scale money launderers. A director of a foreign bank in Dili has said that “the amounts of money some people deposit cannot just come from a small restaurant by the beach”. In 2008 a Nigerian national was detained in possession of over a US \$1 million in counterfeit notes; the year before, foreign criminal elements were detained while trying to smuggle 18 Timorese girls into Indonesia, the youngest being just 12.

Timor is also being used as an alternative route into Indonesia by way of the land border. This avoids Indonesia’s main airports and border crossings now on high alert as a result of the terrorist threat. There are also concerns that the fledging state may be used by terrorist organisations to plan their activities. While the threat of terrorism is minimal, one should keep in mind that on two occasions the American, British and Australian embassies were closed following reports that an attack was imminent.

Crime as a Security Problem

A country with a security sector which is practically non-functional is fertile for the growth of transnational crime. Timor-Leste is still trying to recover from the 2006 domestic crisis and the last thing it needs is organised crime. In any country organised crime is a serious security problem. In a fledgling state like Timor-Leste, it could be fatal. The air link to Singapore brought tremendous

benefits to Timor-Leste but also some challenges. Due to the reach of international criminal organisations, Timor's problems are unlikely to remain only its own.

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