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Missing the Beat

By Rory Callinan / Dili

Last month a baby was shot dead in an inner suburb of East Timor's capital, Dili. His father, a policeman, had returned home from his shift and put his pistol atop a cupboard before lying down for a nap. A short time later, his frantic wife burst into the room, saying their six-year-old son had hold of the gun. Then a shot rang out. Rushing outside, the couple found their youngest child, a six-months-old boy, dead from a bullet wound.

Two weeks later, standing beside the baby's concrete gravestone in his dusty backyard, the officer says he can't discuss the matter, or be named, because he is under investigation. But the incident is symptomatic of the troubles plaguing the Policia Nacional de Timor-Leste. Responsibility for the nation's internal security will soon be transferred to the PNTL from United Nations police and an international peacekeeping force. But concerns about weapons training, discipline and loyalty have some observers wondering if the PNTL is ready to make that transition.

Two years ago, East Timor's police and military fractured along political and geographic lines, leading to bloody street battles in Dili. The conflict left 37 dead, including eight police officers, and displaced 150,000 people, most of whom have only recently returned to their villages. It also led to the dissolution of the Fretilin government.

Since then, the country's fragile internal security has been entrusted to a 1,500-strong contingent of U.N. police and an International Stabilisation Force made up of 920 Australian and New Zealand troops. As part of the security program, the U.N. and the East Timorese government signed a Reform, Restructuring and Rebuilding plan to regenerate the PNTL.

The plan entailed a comprehensive screening process to remove those involved in the violence, followed by a six-month mentoring period for officers, a five-day training course and later a firearms certification course. Ninety-five per cent of the force has now undergone retraining, and in the New Year the first districts are expected to be returned to PNTL control as Australia withdraws 100 of its troops. Assuming the force meets certain benchmarks, the East Timorese government intends the PNTL to be responsible for about 70% of the nation's security by mid-2009.

Fragile Gains The scenario makes some observers nervous. Says one UNPOL source: "If the s___ hits the fan, the PNTL will just head for home. They will go back to their villages and it will be every man for himself." Australian academic Bu Wilson has just completed a review of the PNTL's capability. She fears that "rather than rebuilding the PNTL, the U.N. mission may be instead bequeathing a weak and unstable police force to Timor-Leste."

Wilson found glaring problems with the retraining process. Screening and certification were politicized and confused, she wrote, while some PNTL officers whom the U.N. mission had recommended should be dismissed for breaching integrity rules had instead been promoted. Mentoring by UNPOL had been scaled down, and many UNPOL officers preferred to do the police work themselves.

Some U.N. police are reluctant to speak on the record but privately agree with Wilson's claims. Senior officers acknowledge some shortcomings but remain confident the force will be able to handle security duties. "This is a very young police service," says acting U.N. East Timor Police Commissioner Juan Carlos Arevalo Linares. "We cannot expect to have a police service like Australia's when this country has only had a police service for a little more than six years."

Linares concedes there is much work to do on discipline and the correct use of force, but he cautions against reading too much into the shooting of the baby. "That cannot disqualify the PNTL," he says, "because it's the kind of incident I have seen in other countries with police forces with much more assistance."

But the problems of policing are on plain view in Dili. Late one night, in a shanty-lined street, TIME is hailed by a man bearing an assault rifle and surrounded by a group of drunken friends. He claims he is part of the Health Minister's police bodyguard and says the weapon is kept close at hand in case of an urgent call for help.

Secretary of State for Security Francisco da Costa Guterres, who has responsibility for the police, has told TIME that police are required to leave their guns at the station when they go off duty. He alleges that the officer in the shooting case "made a mistake and took the weapon home with him." But UNPOL sources say observance of the rules varies among police units.

In recent weeks, the PNTL's most visible presence in the country has been at checkpoints on main roads into Dili. They are part of an operation to block any armed protesters from taking part in an anti-government march proposed several months ago by the Fretilin opposition. The roadblocks have raised UNPOL fears that Timorese police could become politicized, further destabilizing the force.

In Short Supply It's widely agreed that the force is woefully under-equipped. Logistics officer Sub-Inspector Lucerio Lay says the PNTL owns no working radios (it relies on the U.N.'s network) and has only 190 vehicles and 271 motorbikes for more than 3,000 police. New radios have been bought from Australia, he says, but they can't be used until special software arrives. While Lay talks, his noisy, cramped office is intermittently blacked out by power cuts.

Police have only 46 computers, mostly old and running a variety of software. Small patrol boats have been ordered to watch the country's 700 km of coastline, but they have not arrived because of a dispute with contractors. There is hardly any equipment for recording or electronically storing fingerprints. There are only 120 tear-gas guns and 150 pepper-spray canisters, equipment U.N. forces found indispensable during the rioting that followed the 2007 elections.

At the PNTL police posts within the Comoro district of the city's west, poorly equipped officers paid \$125 a month live in tents without mosquito nets or proper toilets. At one post the single radio shared by eight men is broken, forcing them to call in reports on their personal mobile phones. At another post, responsible for a 4-sq.-km

district, officers have no patrol vehicles and sprint to jobs on foot. "The U.N. is providing everything," says one UNPOL officer. "Even the toilet paper."

Another issue is the country's 228-km land border with Indonesia, which squirms its mostly unmarked way through dense jungles, over rugged hills and along broad rivers. Just beyond Batugade, at the most northwesterly point of the border, barbed wire and guards block the road into Indonesia. But a kilometer south is a large unfenced clearing amid thickets of stubby palm trees where the constant smugglers' traffic has flattened an area the size of a basketball court. It is littered with the yellow hessian bags used to carry contraband and the remains of smugglers' campfires. "I see the police about once a week," says Alfredo, an Indonesian petrol smuggler. Other smugglers say the regular local police patrol consists of two unarmed officers who walk to the clearing and turn back.

Faction Victim The force is disunited as well as over-stretched. Edward Rees was a former adviser to Ian Martin, the special envoy to East Timor who was sent by the U.N. to assess the situation after the violence of 2006. Now living in Dili, Rees says there are factions in the PNTL that have not forgotten the fighting. "They are trying to work together now, whereas in 2006 they may have been trying to shoot each other." All the same, he worries that the force lacks the cohesion to deal impartially with a large protest or riot, an ever-present threat.

Earlier this year an anonymous brochure was circulated predicting 2006-style trouble should a new police commissioner be chosen from the country's east, but Acting PNTL Commissioner Afonso de Jesus dismisses it as scaremongering. "I don't believe any of this," he says. "We have a strong structure. In 2006, the police split at the top but not down the bottom. At the lower level all the police remained the same." And he is upbeat about his men's ability. "Though we lack support and logistics, as Timorese we will sacrifice those things to do this job." Former U.N. adviser Rees is also optimistic. "Dili is a safer city than it has been in a very long time," he says. "On a day-to-day basis, the PNTL is in a better position to provide safety than UNPOL is."

At Gleno police station, 30 km southwest of Dili, there are signs of progress. While overworked Australian UNPOL officers complain good-naturedly about having to pay \$200 out of their own pocket to buy a cell door, an off-duty PNTL task-force officer brings in a drunken man who has been terrorizing local market traders with a machete. Says an admiring UNPOL district commander, Paul Harvey: "There are PNTL officers here I would rather work with than some officers back home." The long-suffering people of East Timor hope his confidence is well founded.

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