

## Early Warning, Early Response System (EWER) Situation Review: 20 August 2011

### Increased Tensions Relating To Religious Identity

During the months of February – July 2011, a high number of incidents between existing religious groups and those groups who have sought to further their activities in Timor-Leste have been witnessed throughout the territory. These incidents have occurred in the form of public demonstrations, destruction of property, physical assaults and intimidation.

This recent increase demonstrates a shift in local behaviors, as the number of incidents relating to religious identity and conflict, inter-linkages between incidents and the intensity of confrontations have increased. Prior to February 2011, previous incidents occurring since the publication of EWER's Policy Brief on the topic in September 2009<sup>1</sup> were more sporadic and relatively isolated.

In communities where more recently established religious groups have become active, existing congregations are expressing discontent towards the activities conducted by these groups, which have been perceived, on occasion, as being disrespectful towards existing religions as well as Timorese culture and traditions. In particular, the occurrence of conversions and subsequent public declarations of new faith such as baptism ceremonies tend to trigger a hostile response.

The Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (RDTL) states in Article 45.1 that: "Every person is guaranteed the freedom of conscience, religion and worship and the religious denominations are separated from the State". However, a specific policy or legislation to regulate religious activities has not yet been finalized by the Government and National Parliament. As a result, many communities are questioning the legality of certain religious groups as they are unclear as to the current legal process for registration of religious groups.

The current system of registration under the Ministry of Justice does not designate a separate category for the registration of religious groups, but they are to apply for registration as 'associations' or 'foundations', declaring their intention to conduct religious activities, under Decree-Law No. 5/2005 on Non-Profit-Making Corporate Bodies and NGOs. The fact that the legitimacy of this process is not well publicized has given rise to confusion and the subsequent perception that such groups are operating illegally, in contradiction to their registration status.

There is also further misunderstanding as to the correct visa type that international personnel (missionaries) should be using to conduct their activities, as there is no unique visa category for those wishing to conduct religious activities. Additional claims have been made that some personnel are holding tourist visas instead of valid working visas.

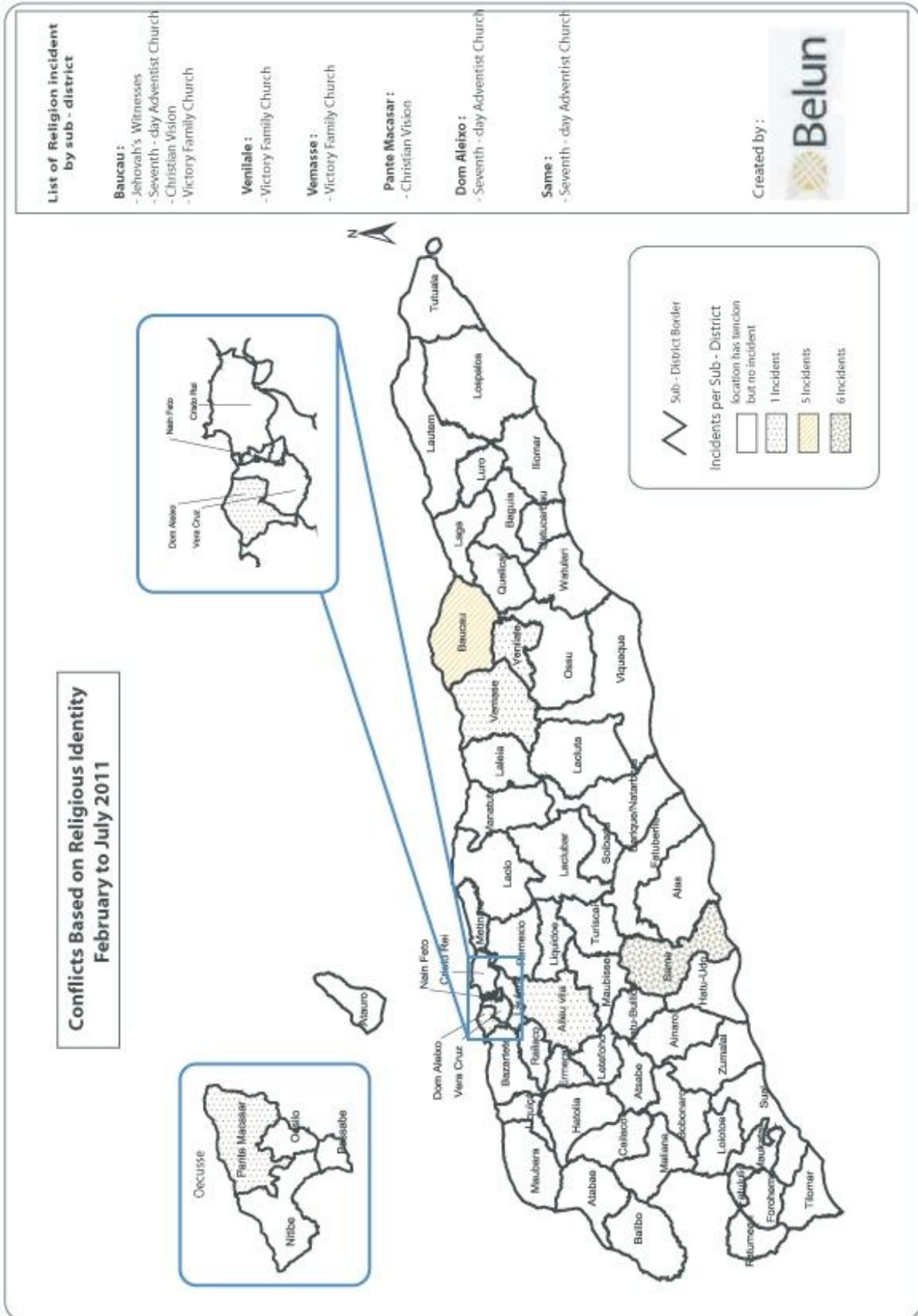
#### SYSTEM BACKGROUND

*The EWER system is working toward enhanced security and community resilience in Timor-Leste. EWER monitoring data tracks information regarding incidents of violence alongside monthly situational indicators measuring potential or future conflict or violence from the sub-district to the national level. 84 trained EWER monitors are currently active in 42 sub-districts throughout the country (with plans to scale up to cover all 65 sub-districts within 2011).*

*The program publishes full reports on a trimestral basis, tracking monitoring data at the sub-district level. Incidents of particular concern arising through the monitoring warrant the production of a Media Alert to encourage more immediate response activities. Longer-term concerns provide basis for further research to be conducted through EWER policy briefs. EWER Reports are intended for use by stakeholders such as local and national state actors and ministries, state security forces, international organizations, non-governmental entities, civil society groups, and the public to help prevent and reduce conflict and tensions in Timor-Leste.*

<sup>1</sup> In September 2009, EWER published a Policy Brief entitled 'Religious Identity and Conflict.' The report is accessible on-line at: <http://www.cicr-columbia.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Policy-Brief-2-Religion.pdf>.

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### KEY BODIES: IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

In order to diffuse tension and prevent the escalation of violent confrontations, the following immediate actions are recommended:

- **The Ministry of Justice** should continue to proactively distribute public information regarding the current correct procedures for religious organizations to register as 'associations' or 'foundations' under Decree-Law No. 5/2005 on Non-Profit-Making Corporate Bodies and NGOs. Furthermore, the Ministry should continue to publicize the government's plans to draft legislation to regulate religious activities and review registration procedures for religious groups. Previous actions to be commended include the co-hosting of a joint seminar on this issue with BELUN (27th June 2011) and the distribution of a press release to further address the matter on 19th July. Information should be made available in both Tetum and Portuguese. The Ministry may also consider making visits to districts in which tensions are running high (particularly Baucau and Manufahi) to conduct public information sessions.
- **The Immigration Service** which has recently been conducting visa inspections among organizations (including religious groups) that employ foreigners, may provide public information on the results of such inspections to either confirm or dispel rumors that foreign missionaries are working illegally (on tourist visas). The service should also review the types of documentation required for each type of visa category to minimize unnecessary bureaucracy that make all working visa applications very convoluted, to ensure that they are facilitating the most efficient and effective process.
- **The Media** (television, newspapers, radio) should exercise caution when reporting on religious issues and refrain from using divisive terminology such as 'false prophets' and 'sects,' which provide a spurious moral justification for existing religious groups to oppose new religious groups. The media should also make efforts to publish opinion pieces and commentaries representing the perspectives of state and civil society as well as those of a diverse selection of religious groups rather than only that of the Catholic Church to prevent bias, and promote a balanced public discourse on the topic.
- **State Actors** should exercise caution when commenting on religious affairs, anticipating the impact and public response to their statements so as not to exacerbate tensions. They should adhere to the principles enshrined in the Constitution to respect democratic principles and uphold human rights, protecting the Constitutional right of citizens to the freedom of religion (Article 45) and ensuring the separation between the Church and State (Article 12.1: '*The State shall recognize and respect the different religious denominations, which are free in their organization and in the exercise of their own activities, to take place in due observance of the Constitution and the law*').
- **Leaders of the Catholic Church** should strongly urge members to refrain from engaging in violence, deeply condemn acts of violence, and make efforts to meet with the leadership of religious groups with whom they have disagreements to resolve issues through dialogue.
- **Leaders of new religious groups** should take steps to ensure that their organizations are operating legally by clearly declaring their intention to engage in religious activities when registering with the Ministry of Justice and FONGTIL, and by ensuring that all foreign personnel are holding appropriate working visas. New groups should work closely with local authorities to receive local consent to conduct their activities and openly announce their arrival and their activities to community representatives in order to reduce suspicion and rumor-spreading. Where hindrances are met with local authorities, these cases should be taken to the Ministry of Justice to be resolved before activities are commenced. They should also make

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efforts to engage in communication with leaders of existing religious congregations and be sensitive to the cultural and societal structures in communities.

- **The Police (PNTL)** should make efforts to prevent violent incidents in sub-districts where new religious groups are known to be conducting their activities and provide protection for vulnerable groups through regular patrols and conduct early preventative intervention if tensions appear to be rising. Religiously motivated crimes committed should be treated and investigated as any other crime.

## KEY FINDINGS<sup>2</sup>

- In **Ainaro** and **Liquiça** districts, since 2009 places of worship for new religious groups such as Christian Vision Church (Igreja Visão Cristão) have been closed due to public opposition and are not able to recommence their activities.
- In **Manatuto**, **Covalima**, **Ermera** and **Bobonaro** districts, existing religious congregations have publicly declared that they oppose the existence of new religious groups such as Christian Vision Church (Igreja Visão Cristão), Victory Family Church (Vitoria Familia), and Jehovah's Witnesses (Testemunha Jehovah).
- In **Maliana** district, on 18<sup>th</sup> October 2010, Suco Ritabou, Sub-district of Maliana, an incident resulted in the destruction of 3 houses of leaders of the religious group 'Visão Cristão' and a warehouse where construction materials for a church for this group were stored was burnt down. No persons suffered physical assault during the incident.
- In **Baucau** district, numerous incidents have occurred:
  - February 2011: a member of the Catholic Church in Bahu (sucu) physically assaulted two members of the Jehovah's Witnesses on the street.
  - 16<sup>th</sup> of March: in Wailili (sucu), while Victory Family Church was conducting a religious service in a house, another religious group threw stones at the house in order to disturb their activities.
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> of April: in Trilolo (sucu) a member of the Catholic Church beat a female member of the Jehovah's witnesses who was conducting house visitations.
  - 4<sup>th</sup> of May: in Venilale sub-district, some members from the Catholic Church inflicted damage on Victory Family Church.
  - 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> of May: while the Jehovah's Witnesses were conducting religious activities, some members from the Catholic Church stoned the church of the Jehovah's Witnesses as an act of opposition to the group's door-to-door visitation method.
  - June: in Seisal (sucu), the Chefe de Suco stopped Igreja Visão Cristão from building a church in the area stating that they did not possess legal documents to construct a church.
  - 24<sup>th</sup> of June: the Catholic Church, the Assemblies of God, the Protestant Church of Timor-Leste (IPTL) and the Muslims organized a peaceful demonstration against the existence of new religious groups in Baucau (Jehovah's

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<sup>2</sup> This section compiles information on incidents captured through the EWER monitoring system that is currently operational in 42 sub-districts (out of 65) throughout the nation. Therefore, information on additional incidents that have occurred in areas not covered by EWER monitoring is limited. It must therefore be pointed out that a greater number of incidents related to religious identity and conflict may have taken place during February – July 2011 than mentioned in this Alert.

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Witnesses, Christian Vision, Seventh-day Adventists and Victory Family Church), demanding that they leave Baucau.

- 17<sup>th</sup> of July: in Vemasse sub-district (suco Loilobu), members of the Catholic Church threw stones at a leader of Victory Family Church when he was on his way to Loilobu.
- In **Oe-cusse** district, a verbal confrontation occurred between members of the Catholic Church and the Christian Vision Church on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April as the latter was conducting religious activities.
- In **Aileu** district, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April fighting occurred between members of the Catholic Church and members of Christian Vision due to past incidents in which houses of Christian Vision members were stoned by members of the Catholic Church. Members of Christian Vision reacted by stoning houses of Catholic members in return.
- In **Manufahi** district, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of June, members of the Catholic Church protested against the Seventh-day Adventist Church in response to information uncovered that suggested that a member of the Adventist Church had buried statues of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ on their property an undefined period of time earlier. This story and the demonstration were televised through TVTL on the 13<sup>th</sup> June. [At a later date, a media report<sup>3</sup> revealed that the burying of the statues had occurred in 2002 by a woman, who had acted on the advice of a Catholic priest, after the statue had been broken in an incident in which her landlord evicted her from her house and damaged the building, as well as her belongings and the statues in the process. Therefore there was no linkage between the burial of the statue and her conversion to another faith, and thus the reaction from the community was based on misinformation.] On the 13<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of June, Catholic community members continued to take action and the houses of the representatives of the Adventist Church were damaged. A peaceful demonstration was organized on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June in Same, followed by further demonstrations on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of July expressing opposition to the presence of the Adventist Church and calling for the Government to create a law to regulate religious activities.
- In **Dili** district, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of June, a few hours after the broadcasting of the demonstration in Manufahi on TVTL, Catholic community members who were unhappy after viewing media reports on the burial of statues in Same threw stones and inflicted damage on the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Fomentu, Comoro, Dili.

### LONGER TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

While the increase in numbers and frequency of incidents related to religious identity is an issue of concern, it is equally worrying that public opinion and debate on the issue often draws on misinformation, rumors and inconsistent interpretations of the law. If this trend is not countered by constructive debates based on an accurate understanding of legal and democratic principles, the result may be an increasingly hostile environment in which clashes amongst different religious groups become more frequent and harmful in nature.

Therefore, in addition to the immediate recommendations above for diffusing tensions, EWER calls for mid to long-term interventions by relevant stakeholders to manage the current situation, prevent escalation, foster religious tolerance and ensure non-discrimination:

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<sup>3</sup> Timor Post, front cover, dated 4 August 2011

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- **The Ministry of Justice** should accelerate the process of preparing legislation to regulate religious activities while ensuring adequate public debate on the subject matter. The Ministry may also consider preparing a separate registration category for religious groups and congregations. In addition, the Ministry may consider issuing a 'transitional policy' to urge organizations to conduct activities in accordance with their registration declaration and provide a 'grace period' to rectify erroneous registrations or newly register under the existing registration framework prior to the enactment of new legislation or registration policy.
- **The National Parliament**, through Commission A, should place priority on debating and approving the proposed legislation, so as to ensure that the contents of the legislation adhere to the principles of separation between Church and State, do not in any way discriminate one religious group against another, and guarantee citizens' rights to follow a religion of their choice.
- **The Immigration Service** should consider, in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ways to improve and accelerate the procedure for issuing working visas, minimizing unnecessary bureaucracy. For the longer term, the Service may also consider creating and administering a separate visa category for religious personnel in coordination with the Ministry of Justice.
- **The Government, Civil Society and Leaders of Religious Groups** may consider re-activating the Forum for Inter-Religious Tolerance (FIRT) in Baucau District, and open membership to new religious groups in order to create a forum to promote peaceful co-existence in the district. Similar inter-religious groups could be established in other districts to promote dialogue between religious leaders.
- **Security Sector Actors** should deliberate on a plan to strengthen protection for frequently targeted religious groups in times of peace as well as times of heightened tension (for example, during the electoral period).
- **All Religious Groups** should invest in educating their members on the importance of non-violence and peaceful resolution of disputes as well as the freedom of all citizens to follow a religion of their choice without threat to their physical and psychological security.
- **New Religious Groups** entering into communities should acquaint themselves with the language, culture and customs within Timorese communities and be sensitive to existing social structures and relationships. If possible, these groups may consider producing voluntary guidelines for effectively and respectfully engaging with Timorese communities and existing religious congregations.
- **Leaders of Religious Groups** may consider establishing a program for non-denominational aid through joint programming amongst religious groups, in collaboration with local authorities, to reach out to meet the developmental needs of communities (both religiously affiliate and non-affiliated) when seeking participation in workshops and other programs, in order to dispel perceptions of exclusivity (that resources are given only to members of certain congregations).
- The **NGO Forum (FONGTIL)**, in its capacity as the umbrella organization for NGOs in Timor-Leste, may consider monitoring the activities of NGOs in order to ensure that NGOs are conducting activities that adhere to their organizational mission and purpose.

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- **BELUN**, through its EWER program, should continue to monitor developments regarding religious identity and conflict and continue to support Conflict Prevention and Response Networks (CPRNs) at the sub-district level to implement activities that will promote tolerance.

## CONCLUSION

BELUN believes that although the escalation of conflict regarding religious identity is a great challenge, it also presents an opportunity for all stakeholders to examine the legal, cultural and societal problems associated with this phenomenon and build foundations for the peaceful co-existence of diverse religions in Timor-Leste. BELUN urges the Government of Timor-Leste, leaders of religious groups, civil society and other stakeholders to actively collaborate to discuss and implement the proposals mentioned above and deliberate on other means to promote the peaceful resolution of conflicts based on religious identity.

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