HALI BA DAME [HABADA]

Monitoring and Advocacy for Community Security

SECURITY MONITORING REPORT ON ONLINE GAMBLING AND SCAM CALL CENTER OPERATIONS IN TIMOR-LESTE

Monitoring Period: 26 June – 19 July 2026

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1. Introduction

Online gambling and scam call centres refer to organized criminal operations that use private premises—often rented residential properties or warehouses—to conduct online fraud, illegal gambling, and cyber fraud targeting victims across the region and globally. This criminal model has attracted significant international attention in recent years following its rapid expansion in Cambodia, Myanmar, and the Philippines**,** where the United Nations and human rights organizations have documented strong links to human trafficking, forced labour, and violations of fundamental rights against individuals who were deceived into working within these networks.

Timor-Leste’s strategic land and maritime borders, combined with still-limited economic and financial oversight capacity, have made the country an emerging destination for these networks to establish their operations. In August 2025, the Scientific Criminal Investigation Police (PCIC) dismantled an online fraud centre in Oecusse, and subsequently, in October 2025, the Government cancelled operating licences for online gambling and betting activities through Government Resolution No. 54/2026. Later, the National Police of Timor-Leste (PNTL) and PCIC also conducted major operations in the capital, Dili, to dismantle online gambling and scam call centre activities. Nevertheless, between 26 June and 19 July 2026 alone—a period of only three weeks—security institutions discovered and dismantled twelve (12) online gambling and scam call centre operations in the municipalities of Liquiçá and Dili. This pattern does not represent an isolated incident. The frequency of operations (approximately every two to three days), the diversity of locations (from Liquiçá to Aileu and various neighbourhoods in Dili), and the scale of each case (ranging from 2 to 99 individuals) indicate the presence of networks operating with significant structures, financing, and logistical coordination.

Comparisons with regional experiences are essential to understanding the scale of this issue. In Cambodia and Myanmar, scam call centre operations have expanded from small-scale activities into a multi-billion-dollar industry over a period of five to seven years. Regional governments have recognized that a central challenge is the weak coordination among state agencies and limited capacity to investigate complex financial networks operating across multiple countries. Timor-Leste, with its small population and limited institutional resources, is likely to face similar challenges, with even more constrained response capacity. This reinforces the argument that Timor-Leste’s response requires early prevention measures rather than relying solely on reactions after major cases have already become public.

This report is based on the compilation and analysis of operational reports from PNTL and PCIC that were made publicly available during the period from 26 June to 19 July 2026. HABADA collected information on the date, location, responsible institutions, nationality of suspects, number of individuals detained, and equipment seized during each operation, followed by a comparative analysis to identify overall patterns, trends, and institutional gaps. This report does not include independent field verification due to access limitations; therefore, the information presented is drawn from official sources from PNTL, PCIC, media reports, and international organizations**.**

2. Summary of Operational Cases (June – July 2026)

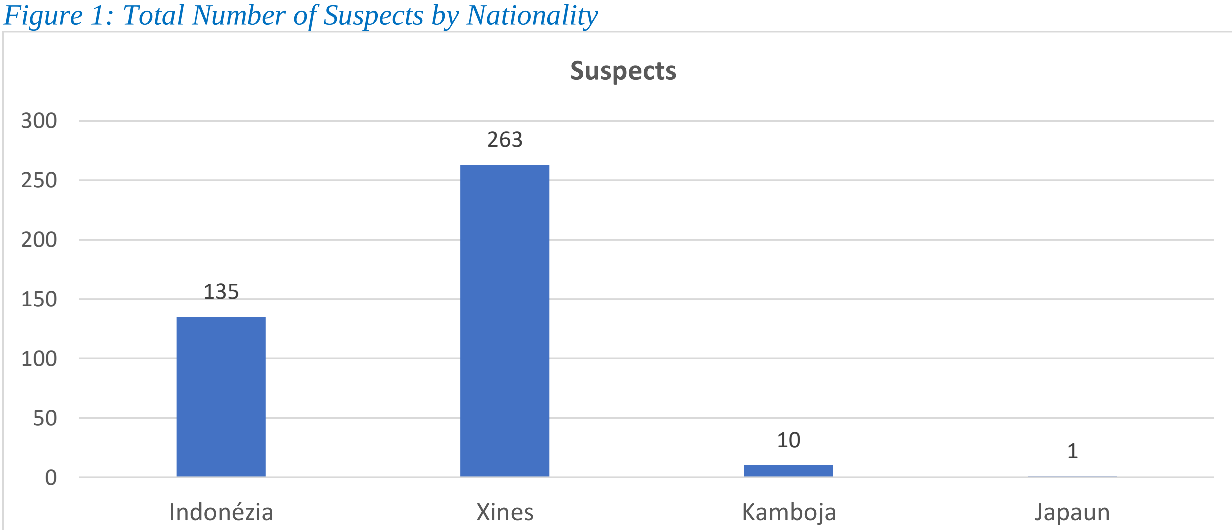
The following table presents the **thirteen (13) operations** conducted by **PNTL and PCIC** during the monitoring period:

Table 1: Thirteen (13) Operations Conducted by PNTL, PCIC, and the Migration Service During the Monitoring Period (26 June – 19 July 2026)

Date	Location	Institution (s)	Nationality	Detained/ Identified
26 June 2026	Tibar, Liquiçá	PNTL	Indonesian (54), Cambodian (7)	61
4 July 2026	Aileu	PNTL Aileu Municipality	Chinese	44
8 July 2026	Bebonuk, Dili	PCIC	Chinese (98), Cambodian (1)	99
8 July 2026	Manleu, Dili	PNTL, Migration Service	Chinese (27), Cambodian (2)	29
9 July 2026	Metiaut, Dili	PNTL	Chinese	24
13 July 2026	Ulmera, Liquiçá	PNTL	Indonesian (75), Chinese (1)	76
13 July 2026	Comoro, Dili	PNTL	Chinese	14
14 July 2026	Fomento II, Dili	PCIC	Chinese	28
14 July 2026	Maumeta, Liquiçá	PNTL Liquiça Municipality	Chinese	17
17 July 2026	Manleu City 8, Dili	PCIC	Chinese	33
17 July 2026	Kulu-Hun, Dili	PCIC	Chinese	19
18 July 2026	Bedois, Dili	PNTL, Migration Service	Indonesian (6) & Chinese (1)	7
19 July 2026	Auhun, Dili	PNTL	Chinese (1) & Japanese (1)	2
Total				453

Source**:** HABADA monitoring results, 26 June – 19 July 2026.

Figure 1: Total Number of Suspects by Nationality



A total of 453 individuals were identified or detained within a period of only three weeks**.** The 44 Chinese nationals identified on 4 July 2026 in Aileu Municipality were later clarified by the Migration Service as having complete documentation (passports and visas) and no indications of involvement in criminal activities. Therefore, only 409 suspects were subject to criminal proceedings.

3. Patterns and Trend Analysis

3.1 Predominance of Chinese Nationals

Among the cases identified, eleven (11) involved suspects of Chinese nationality, and in the majority of these cases, Chinese nationals represented the largest group. Only the cases in Tibar and Ulmera (Liquiçá) involved Indonesian nationals as the majority group. This pattern is consistent with regional trends in Southeast Asia, where international investigations have documented the involvement of Chinese organized crime networks in fraud operations in Cambodia, Myanmar, and the Philippines. The significant presence of Chinese nationals in cases identified in Timor-Leste suggests that these networks may be expanding or relocating their operations to new locations following intensified enforcement actions in other parts of the region.

3.2 Geographic Distribution

The operations were not limited to the capital, Dili, but also extended to the municipality of Liquiçá (three cases). Within Dili itself, cases were identified across various neighbourhoods—including Bebonuk, Manleu, Metiaut, Comoro, Fomento II, Kulu-Hun, Bedois, Auhun, and Manleu City 8—indicating that these operations were not concentrated in a single area but were dispersed across different locations throughout the capital. This geographic distribution increases the challenges for PNTL and PCIC in conducting effective enforcement actions, requiring greater resources and stronger coordination.

3.3 Use of Residential Properties and Warehouses

The operations used physical structures that appeared to be ordinary houses or warehouses, including a warehouse (Bebonuk), rented private residences (Manleu, Metiaut, Aileu, and Maumeta), and hotels (Manleu City 8 and Auhun). The Metiaut case is particularly notable: PNTL discovered 43 beds installed inside a two-storey building, indicating that the premises also served as accommodation for workers. This is consistent with regional patterns in which victims of human trafficking are confined and compelled to work under restrictive conditions.

3.4 Scale and Equipment

The seizure of equipment—including 88 computers and 13 laptops in Bebonuk—indicates a significant operational scale, suggesting substantial financial investment by organized criminal networks behind these fraud operations. An operation of this scale and nature is unlikely to be financed by small groups or individual actors alone; it requires capital, logistics, and international networks to establish and sustain.

3.5 Rapid Escalation Within a Short Period

An examination of the chronology of these cases reveals a concerning pattern: between 26 June and 19 July (within a period of only three weeks), the number of operations increased from one per week to three or four operations in the final week. In the final week alone (13–14 July), PNTL and PCIC conducted four operations within two days, involving a total of 135 individuals identified/detained. This acceleration may reflect two possible scenarios: (a) intensified enforcement efforts by security institutions following the discovery of initial cases; or (b) active expansion by organized criminal networks across the territory, rapidly establishing new locations before detection by authorities. In practice, both factors may be occurring simultaneously: the dismantling of individual sites may force networks to relocate their operations to new locations, creating a "balloon effect" commonly observed in global responses to organized crime. If this assessment is correct, it indicates that a purely reactive enforcement approach will not be sufficient; a preventive strategy targeting the financial structures and leadership of these networks is needed to effectively disrupt these activities.

4. Implications for National Security and Governance

4.1 Risk of International Organized Crime

The presence of fraud centre operations of the scale identified during this short period indicates that Timor-Leste has become part of a broader transnational organized crime network, rather than merely experiencing isolated local incidents. This highlights the urgent need for Timor-Leste to strengthen cooperation with INTERPOL, bilateral partners, and regional organizations such as ASEAN to share information and dismantle these networks.

4.2 Risk of Human Trafficking

Details such as "43 beds installed inside a two-storey building" (Metiaut) and large-scale detentions (99 individuals in Bebonuk and 76 in Ulmera) raise significant concerns that some individuals involved may not be perpetrators, but may instead be potential victims of human trafficking who were coerced or deceived into working. HABADA recommends that investigations clearly distinguish between the organizers/leaders of these networks and potential victims who also require protection, rather than solely being subject to deportation.

4.3 Integrity of the Border and Visa Systems

The fact that foreign nationals were able to enter Timor-Leste in large numbers (more than 90 individuals) and remain undetected for a significant period indicates serious weaknesses in the border control and visa systems. This requires an urgent review of how foreign nationals obtain visas, enter the country, and subsequently establish large-scale operations, such as warehouses and residential facilities, without detection over extended periods.

4.4 Diplomatic and Economic Implications

The scale of these cases also carries diplomatic implications, particularly in relation to the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Indonesia, whose nationals represent the majority of those involved in these cases. The governments of China and Indonesia, as well as other governments in the region, have demonstrated strong interest in combating online gambling and scam call centre activities affecting their citizens. Therefore, bilateral cooperation presents an important opportunity for Timor-Leste to strengthen diplomatic relations and obtain technical assistance. At the same time, if these cases continue to increase without effective control measures, this could damage Timor-Leste's reputation as a safe destination for investment and tourism and could affect government efforts to attract legitimate foreign investment. The private sector and business community also require attention, as warehouses and residential properties rented for illegal operations may involve property owners who, knowingly or unknowingly, facilitate organized criminal activities through rental agreements.

5. Regional and International Context

This section situates the findings from June–July 2026 within a broader context by drawing on United Nations reports, regional agencies, and media reports published between 2025 and 2026, which independently reinforce the trend of expanding fraud centres in Timor-Leste and across the region.

5.1 UNODC's Specific Alert Regarding Timor-Leste

In September 2025, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) issued a Regional Organized Crime Threat Alert, warning that transnational organized crime networks were infiltrating the Oecusse-Ambeno Special Administrative Region (RAEOA) through criminal foreign direct investment (criminal FDI). This followed a police operation at a hotel in the region, where SIM cards and Starlink satellite internet devices were discovered—equipment that UNODC identified as an indicator associated with fraud centre activities. UNODC linked these networks to entities associated with convicted cybercriminals, offshore gambling operators, and groups affiliated with triads. It further warned that the developments observed in Timor-Leste resemble the early stages of fraud centre crises previously affecting countries in the Mekong region and the Philippines.

UNODC's subsequent case study alert described how a network linked to the 14K Triad sought to use gaming and technology companies—including a company appointed to manage Timor-Leste's national digital ID project—to incorporate illicit infrastructure within the framework of the country's free trade zone. According to the alert, the National Parliament of Timor-Leste called for the suspension and revocation of online gambling licences nationwide due to risks to national security, social stability, and international reputation.

5.2 Media Investigations

In September 2025**,** Al Jazeera reported that a police operation at a hotel in Oecusse uncovered evidence consistent with fraud centre operations, and that approximately 30 workers from Indonesia, Malaysia, and China were detained. UNODC stated that it remained unclear whether these individuals were victims of human trafficking or involved actors. The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), in a joint investigation with The Guardian Australia, found that individuals previously sanctioned by the **United States** for alleged links to the Prince Group, a Cambodia-based entity described as one of the world's largest alleged cyber-fraud syndicates, had connections to a cryptocurrency resort project in Timor-Leste. OCCRP also reported that Timor-Leste's dollarized economy, cash-based financial system, relatively weak border controls, and limited police resources create structural conditions that may be attractive to networks similar to those operating in Cambodia.

Local reporting by HATUTAN and TATOLI (Timor-Leste national media outlets) documented the operations referenced in this report, including the 26 June operation in Tibar, Liquiçá, and subsequent judicial processes in Dili, where prosecutors sought charges and travel restriction measures against defendants in relation to allegations of computer fraud, criminal association, and illegal gambling. International coverage in mid-July 2026 (ABC Australia and other media outlets) reported that Timor-Leste police had detained more than 300 Chinese, Indonesian, and Cambodian nationals in operations in Dili cited in this report.

5.3 UN Human Rights Report on the Broader Regional Crisis

In May 2025, three UN Special Rapporteurs—covering contemporary forms of slavery, trafficking in persons, and the human rights situation in Cambodia—issued a joint statement warning that forced criminality within scam centres in Southeast Asia had reached a humanitarian and human rights crisis level. The statement documented abuses including torture, extreme violence, and arbitrary detention affecting thousands of workers who were victims of human trafficking in Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, the Philippines, and Malaysia.

In February 2026, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) published a comprehensive report, "A Wicked Problem," based on trauma-informed interviews with survivors from Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Thailand, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. The report found that, by March 2025, victims from at least 66 countries had been trafficked into online scam centres, with a credible estimate of at least 300,000 people working in such operations across Southeast Asia and estimated annual global revenues of approximately US$64 billion. OHCHR documented systematic torture, sexual abuse, forced abortions, deprivation of food, forced confinement, and corruption. Survivors described border officials coordinating with recruiters and police officers receiving payments from detention centre managers.

The UNODC awareness campaign #TrappedInScamCrime, launched in December 2025 in partnership with International Justice Mission and funded by the United States Department of State, also described this phenomenon as a form of industrial-scale human exploitation, in which trafficking victims are forced to deceive others while often facing legal consequences themselves rather than receiving protection.

5.4 Why This Matters for HABADA's Findings?

UN and media records establish three points that are directly relevant to the case data presented in Sections 2–4 of this report. First, the demographic profile of the suspects documented by HABADA—particularly Chinese nationals, with Indonesian nationals forming the majority in the two Liquiçá cases—reflects nationality patterns that UNODC and OHCHR have described elsewhere in the region. Second, the physical infrastructure identified in Timor-Leste (rented residences, warehouses, hotels, and dormitory-style sleeping arrangements for multiple occupants) corresponds with the complex typologies documented by OHCHR in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos, reinforcing HABADA's concern that some detained individuals may be potential victims of human trafficking rather than involved actors. Third, the UNODC threat alert issued in September 2025—released nearly one year before the June–July 2026 operations documented in this report—indicates that international agencies had already identified Timor-Leste as an emerging location of concern before the scale of the issue became publicly visible through law enforcement actions. This reinforces HABADA's recommendation for a prevention-oriented strategy rather than relying solely on reactive responses.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The discovery of twelve online gambling and scam call centre operations within a three-week period demonstrates that Timor-Leste is currently facing a new and serious challenge in the area of transnational organized crime. While the efforts of PNTL and PCIC to dismantle these operations deserve recognition and support, HABADA will continue to monitor developments in these cases, particularly the subsequent judicial processes. This is crucial not only for Timor-Leste's national security, but also for the country's international reputation as a state capable of controlling its territory and protecting its citizens and visitors from exploitation by organized criminal networks.

Based on these findings, HABADA recommends:

For the Government

- Establish **a** Multi-Sectoral Task Force with a clear mandate**,** or strengthen the Interministerial Security Commission**,** to coordinate responses among PNTL, PCIC, the Migration Service, Intelligence Service, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Tourism, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs to address the phenomenon of online gambling and scam call centres.
- Conduct an urgent review of visa policies and border control systems, particularly regarding large groups of visitors from specific countries.
- Increase public transparency regarding subsequent judicial processes involving detained foreign nationals, including information on formal charges and case outcomes.

For PNTL and PCIC

- Strengthen coordination between municipal commands and the Migration Service through an urgent formal protocol (SOP) to ensure a rapid response whenever detained foreign nationals require transfer.

- Conduct further investigations into potential links between different cases to determine whether they are connected to a single organized network or multiple independent networks.
- Establish a specialized investigation team and involve the Anti-Human Trafficking Commission (KLATU) to investigate human trafficking-related cases and identify and protect potential victims among those detained.

For Development Partners

- Support Timor-Leste with technical capacity-building and resources to investigate transnational organized crime networks, particularly in the areas of digital forensics and financial investigations.
- Cooperate with authorities in China, Indonesia, and Cambodia to ensure that, when appropriate, deportations of their nationals are carried out with respect for human rights.

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