

Snapped — one fugitive, one rocket launcher

From: www.theage.com.au

Tom Hyland
January 14, 2007

EAST TIMOR'S fugitive rebel leader Alfredo Reinado, wanted for attempted murder and armed rebellion, has been photographed with a rocket launcher of the same type as those stolen from the Australian Army.

The picture was taken late last year, about the time Reinado attended a seminar in the presence of Australian troops, who have close and cordial relations with him despite his fugitive status.

The launcher on Reinado's shoulder is a light anti-armour weapon (LAW), of the same type issued to Australian troops in East Timor.

The weapons have been at the centre of a security scare in Australia, where stolen rockets allegedly fell into the hands of terrorists. NSW police are still trying to find six of the missing launchers.

News that Reinado, who escaped from a Dili jail last August, has his hands on a missile capable of disabling a tank or bringing down a helicopter has raised intriguing and alarming speculation in Timorese and security circles.

A security expert said it was possible the missile came from criminal sources in Australia.

And if Reinado had more than one of the rockets, it raised serious problems for Australian forces if they tried to move against him, the expert said.

A spokesman for Defence Minister Brendan Nelson denied Australian troops had allowed Reinado to pose with an Australian LAW.

Nor, he said, had the Australian Defence Force supplied such weapons to the East Timorese Defence Force, from which Reinado deserted last May as East Timor's security forces disintegrated and the country descended into political chaos. He said all the LAWs issued to Australian troops in Timor were accounted for.

Last month, the Government announced an audit of stocks of the LAW, which fires a 66mm missile, following thefts from Australian armouries.

This month, a Sydney man was charged with possessing stolen rockets. Police alleged the weapons were in the hands of a terrorist group that planned to use them to attack targets in Sydney, including the Lucas Heights nuclear reactor.

The Reinado photograph was taken in late November, when the rebel leader spoke in the town of Suai at a seminar to promote reconciliation attended by government and church leaders. In interviews at the time, Reinado boasted he had no intention of surrendering or handing over his weapons.

Australian officers also defended their decision not to arrest him, saying they were acting on the advice of the Dili Government, which hopes to entice the former major to surrender and avoid more bloodshed in the traumatised nation.

Theories abound as to where Reinado obtained the weapon.

An East Timorese blogger has speculated it may have come from Indonesian sources or even from criminal connections in Australia. An international security expert said neither East Timor's police nor army officially possessed LAWs, but it was possible such rockets had been obtained and never entered in official inventories.

It was also possible the launcher came from "across the border" in Indonesia or from Australian criminals.

It was unclear from the Reinado photo whether the launcher was armed. The LAW is a one-shot weapon, and the one in Reinado's hands could already have been fired or was a safe training model.

But if it was an armed weapon, and Reinado had more of them, "it's pretty serious", the expert said. "An LAW could shoot down a Black Hawk helicopter, no problem," he said.

LIFE AND TIMES OF ALFREDO REINADO

- Former head of East Timor's military police
- Deserted with 20 soldiers in May last year.
- Abducted by Indonesian troops as a boy during occupation of East Timor and forced to work as an army porter.
- Escaped to Australia by boat in 1995.
- Returned to East Timor after its independence and in 2002 joined his country's new armed forces.
- Arrested by Australian troops on firearms charges last year.

- Led a mass escape from jail in August.



Alfredo Reinado with a light anti-armour weapon, capable of bringing down a helicopter or punching a hole in an armoured personnel carrier.