

Timor: Aid needed but there's no famine

SMH
6.3.82
P.1

PETER HASTINGS writes:

About one month ago the Indonesian Embassy contacted me in Sydney and asked me whether I could visit East Timor as part of a proposed pre-election visit to Indonesia.

The reason for the invitation was the Herald's long established interest in Indonesia, my long association with it and my previous visits to East Timor in particular.

A couple of weeks later the Indonesian Embassy told me the Indonesian Government had also decided to ask Mr Gough Whitlam to make an unofficial visit to the province.

It was suggested that I should travel there not later than March 1, when we could have a thorough briefing by the International Committee of the Red Cross, which was concluding an inspection in Timor of Red Cross and Government aid activities.

Our visit lasted four days. We were thoroughly briefed by the ICRC in Bali before going to Dili. We visited by civil helicopter small and large centres.

We were accompanied throughout the visit by the ICRC delegate in Dili — the Red Cross field representative — Mr Cedric Neukomm, a Swiss who has spent two-and-a-half years on the island and who speaks Indonesian.

Apart from Army briefings, we had no armed forces representatives travelling with us. Interpretation was carried out by a Timorese.

We had interviews with the civil administration in every centre, doctors, teachers and nurses. We spoke to priests and we interviewed at length the Apostolic Administrator, Monsignor Mousinho Loles da Costa who, because the Vatican does not recognise Indonesia's incorporation of the province, holds his appointment from Rome.

From PETER HASTINGS,
Foreign Editor, in Jakarta

There is no famine in East Timor and no signs of one in any of nine important centres — some badly affected by food shortages a few years ago — which Mr Gough Whitlam and I visited this week.

We were accompanied by the International Committee of the Red Cross delegate (representative) on the island, Mr Cedric Neukomm, in a comprehensive three days helicopter tour of the island.

There are certainly pockets of population short of food in a desperately poor island with poor communications. There is also a perennial risk of severe food shortage leading to famine in the first three months of every year.

There is need of the Australian gift of 1,000 tonnes of corn due at the end of this month to be distributed by the ICRC to stor-

age sheds in various parts of the island as buffer stocks against a famine possibility.

But there is no doubt that the situation has improved immeasurably since my last visit in September, 1978, and Herald correspondent Peter Rodgers's 1979 visit.

That is also the opinion of the top-level ICRC team that spent a fortnight in East Timor prior to our arrival and whose three Swiss members — Mr David Delapraz, Dr Armin Willy and Miss Romaine Tissieres — briefed us thoroughly in Bali before we left for Dili.

The ICRC has been working in East Timor with the Indonesian - Red Cross, the Indonesian Government and the Catholic Relief Services in a systematic cover of affected areas with regard to crops, buffer stocks, medical care and family reunion.

The ICRC view that the situation has improved immeasurably

in the last two years is shared by the CRS executive director in Indonesia, Mr Patrick Johns, who said that he visited East Timor in January.

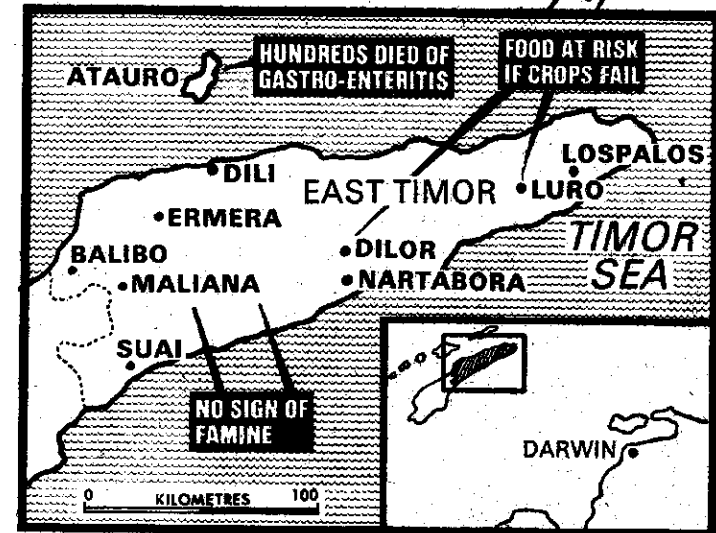
"A famine situation," he reported last month to his executive director in New York, Bishop Edwin Broderick, "does not exist in East Timor."

He said in his report that there were "pockets" suffering a food shortage which Government officials freely admitted and for the alleviation of which the Australian corn gift was intended.

His report, however, contained the highly significant statement: "For your information, I also met with Monsignor da Costa, the Apostolic Administrator (frequently referred to as the bishop) who was the author of the famine reports."

"He has not visited any of the (alleged famine) areas in question and has not specified names of villages suffering famine."

In Dili we discovered that Mon-



signor da Costa had received a letter from the Australian (Catholic) Episcopal Conference while he was attending an Indonesian episcopal conference in Jakarta as an observer.

The letter asked the bishop if there was anything that Australian Catholic sources could provide.

Continued on Page 6

SMH 6.3.82 p.6

No Timor famine, but aid needed

From Page 1

The bishop replied stating that unless a major relief operation started there would be famine in Timor. He also alleged that in the military operations last year many Timorese were killed including "innocent children, pregnant women and defenceless people."

Mr Neukomm told Mr Whitlam and myself that in a conversation with Monsignor da Costa before the bishop went to Jakarta he told him that 500 tonnes of Australian corn had been procured and that he was negotiating for a further 500 tonnes. He also said that famine was therefore extremely unlikely.

We further discovered that the Papal Nuncio in Jakarta, the Most Rev Monsignor Pablo Puente, had told the bishop the same thing.

We met the bishop in his house. He is a mixed race man in his early sixties, we guessed, affable if nervous. He spoke good English and was quite open in his condemnation of the Indonesians.

He made statements about "hundreds dying daily" on Atauro Island, which Mr Whitlam and I were to visit next day, which he had not visited.

He said he relied on his priests for information.

Atauro rises blue and beautiful out of the waters of Wetter Strait. It is in fact arid and its normal population of 5,000 often face food shortages.

It is the island in which in 1975 the last Portuguese governor, Leomos de Pires, holed up with his paratroops before flying off to Darwin and home while civil war raged in Dili.

Starting in the middle of last year, the Indonesian Army started bringing in families from the Los Palos area in eastern Timor who had relatives among hard-core Fretilin fighters and supporters in the hills.

As kinsmen, Fretilin guerillas could exact food and supplies from them.

The theory is simple enough. Clan and tribal lines are as tightly drawn in Timor as in Melanesia. Relatives of Fretilin fighters would have to help if requested. Those not related to them would not.

In all 806 families comprising 3,737 people were brought to Atauro after the military operations in east-

ern Timor in June, July and August. Families are now being sent back.

Many hundreds did die on Atauro because of severe gastroenteritis. According to Dr Willy of the Red Cross, past malnutrition had so lowered resistance, especially in the close confinement of huts, that many were susceptible to disease. This was a very different story from that of the bishop.

When we visited the island with the Red Cross we found that the Government had erected avenues of houses, provided garden plots, running water, seed, medical supplies and first aid posts which the ICRC had regularly monitored.

It is easy of course to criticise the bishop and many do, not just the Indonesians. Not the least critical by report is the Apostolic Nuncio in Jakarta, who can be and is often just as critical of the Indonesians.

Inevitably the visit broke up into favourable and unfavourable impressions.

There is a great deal on the credit side and food for thought for critics of Indonesia.

In all of the centres we visited — Suai, Maliana, Ermera, Atauro, Natabora, Dilor, Jos Palos and Luro — there were no signs of famine, although several, specially Dilor and Luro, are at risk. If the crops fail they will need access to buffer stocks which are being sent to them.

In most we saw maize growing and mounds of corn cobs readied for roasting. In most areas rice padi was planted and from the air the area around Laga, where Peter Rodgers photographed several famine children in 1979 is heavily planted with padi. The Red Cross warned it might have been planted too late as the dry starts soon. Laga may need buffer stocks as well.

The most noticeable things are either new or rebuilt schools with children from primary age through to 18 years being taught the Indonesian curriculum in the Indonesian language.

All centres we visited except one had a communal television set. At the moment all they see are beamed programs from Jakarta of riveting boredom but eventually, as elsewhere in Indonesia, educational film cassettes will become available. But it is an expensive project.

News broadcasts and comment is

broadcast in Indonesian and in Tetum, the most widely spoken vernacular. An interpreter told us that in Portuguese times radio broadcasts were in Portuguese only. "For the few," he said, "like me."

We found the hospitals primitive, about the equivalent of a PNG aid post, much better in larger centres. Indonesian doctors were in attendance although too many, according to Mr Neukomm, show a disappointing desire to head for Dili more often than they should.

Patients in each centre suffered from the same diseases — beriberi, respiratory infections, malaria, severe skin disorders and severe gastroenteritis-caused by a number of factors including worms.

We saw no evidence of famine. I do not believe it possible to walk through villages comprising many hundreds of people and not discover famine and famine related symptoms and diseases if famine exists.

In Portuguese times transport was almost entirely by road, except along the coast, and the roads were terrible, bridges unsafe or liable to be washed out in the wet. The roads are still terrible but are gradually being improved.

The road from Dili to Ermera, for example, is bitumenised for half its length and work has started on new and much needed roads elsewhere. The costs are ferocious and a large percentage of this year's central government budget of \$US100 million — the highest for any Indonesian province — is earmarked for roads.

But perhaps the most vivid impression from the air is the mushrooming growth of resettlement areas.

In every centre of any size there are anything from 20 to several hundred new homes. Their galvanised tin roofs — functional but ugly in contrast to traditional atap thatch roofs — glint in the sunlight. The administration says that between 4,000 and 5,000 homes have been built in the past two years.

In each centre the new houses belong mainly to people who fled to the hills during the civil war of the Indonesian intervention. They have only relatively recently been brought down and resettled,

given food, seed, medical treatment and their children put to school.

The most difficult thing to estimate therefore was security and the strength of Fretilin. In marked contrast to my visit in 1978 there were relatively few soldiers to be seen.

We were never conscious of the military. In fact, except at briefings, we saw very few people in uniform.

By the same token, if Fretilin forces are as active as many claim the civil pilots of the Red Cross helicopters who flew us the length and breadth of the country showed no signs of believing it.

We flew at 500 to 1,000 feet above ridges and mountain tops in several allegedly Fretilin infested areas. We had no set flightpath because the rapid build-up of cloud forces pilots to make quite wide detours. We should have been sitting ducks.

The official Indonesian estimate of Fretilin is now about 130 hard-core gun-carrying guerillas and perhaps 200 non-armed supporters or even family.

After last year's Operasi Keamanan in eastern Timor, in the general area of Los Palos and Queque, the Indonesian Army claims that Fretilin has now broken up into small guerilla groups of four or five.

The administration claims they are sick and hungry.

I asked often why they did not surrender as 15,000 others have. I was told they were either too frightened to come down from the hills or under threat of their life by a few hard-core leaders.

The Indonesians say that Fretilin is no longer a menace. It is not but it is still a nuisance. Despite Indonesian denials at least several Indonesian soldiers are killed each month and perhaps as many Fretilin.

Last year the Army — now estimated at perhaps three regular battalions of 400 men each and two Hansip battalions of Timorese Home Guard of the same number — used two different tactics to eradicate Fretilin in the Los Palos area.

One was the use of the pagar betis or human fence. This is not, as Australian critics claim, an operation in which villagers are forced to advance ahead of troops to flush out Fretilin guerillas.

It is an operation in which Fretilin are gradually isolated and surrounded by resettlement villages. The theory is that they will eventually starve or surrender. The other method had been frankly disastrous as well as inhumane.

Throughout the middle and spring months of last year an alleged 50,000 Timorese men (certainly not less than 30,000 men) 16 years and up, were taken to the hills to contact Fretilin groups and discuss amnesty possibilities.

The operation was not only clumsy but completely counter-productive. It resulted in few surrenders and took thousands of able-bodied men away from the urgent needs of planting and other village duties.

Its worst effect was to destroy in a single blow a degree of trust that had been built up between villagers and a Government which had brought them food, medicine and schools, a fact on which the Papal Nuncio has reportedly made acid comment.

Simply to reiterate there is no famine and that steps are being taken against any such possibility is simply to state what the ICRC, the Indonesian Red Cross, the US Catholic Relief Services and the Papal Nuncio all say and believe.

Indonesia has in fact done far better in the wake of a bitter civil war and bloody intervention in East Timor than it has in Irian Jaya, where if the same efforts and money had been spent better results might have been achieved.

But it has a long way to go in what is like West Timor, Flores and Irian Jaya, a predominantly Christian province.

For this reason the Indonesian Government will need to listen to the Church even where it has a right to be resentful of misrepresentation.

Timor's priests, and of one I can only speak with the greatest respect, remain the conscience of a whole people.

[Professor Jamie Mackie and Professor James Fox did not accompany Mr Whitlam to Timor, as reported on Thursday.

Professor Mackie is ill and Professor Fox returned to Australia before the Timor visit.]