

# Irritated Indonesia leaves corn on docks

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in Jakarta

The Indonesian Government may refuse to accept 1,000 tonnes of corn offered by Australia as buffer food stock for East Timor.

Indonesia's stand follows wide publicity in the Australian press on parts of a letter from the apostolic administrator in Dili, East Timor, Monsignor Martinho da Costa Lopes, forecasting widespread famine in June.

The information was issued by the aid organisation Australian Catholic Relief.

The official Indonesian position is that Dili's warehouses are full and there is no room for the corn.

This is untrue. While the warehouses have food and other stocks in them there's plenty of room for the corn.

The real reason for the present uncertain situation is Jakarta's continuing anger over the credence given by Australian Catholic Relief to Monsignor da Costa Lopes's letter, which the Government here claims was mischievous and false.

The letter was certainly inaccurate and mischievous in that when the administrator wrote the letter predicting famine he knew without doubt that the Indonesian Administration, the Indonesian Red Cross and the International committee of the Red Cross in Geneva—those responsible for handling famine—disagreed with him. He knew also that the ICRC had already successfully negotiated 500 tonnes of Australian corn as buffer stock and was negotiating another 500 tonnes, a fact he failed to mention in his letter.

But while the administrator's actions are one thing the fate of 1,000 tonnes of corn, worth \$340,000 and lying in sheds on a Brisbane wharf when it should be in Dili warehouses, is very much another.

The formal position is that the corn was made over by the Australian Government as a gift to the ICRC for disbursement as buffer stock in East Timor in conjunction with the PMI (Indonesian Red Cross).

Although the PMI is an autonomous body, in major policy matters it is subject to direction by the Indonesian Government.

The Indonesian Government approved the Australian gift last November.

Following Australian press reports and editorial comment on the monsignor's letter early this year, the Indonesian Government in effect reversed its decision to allow

the PMI (as an ICRC partner) to accept the gift.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Street, announced later that the corn offer had been withdrawn, but wisely added the rider that the Australian Government nevertheless still stood ready to offer any assistance required.

Substantial elements in the Indonesian government which wish the corn deal to go ahead refer to the Australian withdrawal as a postponement. In a sense it is, as Mr Street's rider suggests. But they have their fingers crossed.

There are problems looming. While corn lasts longer than some grains in storage there are limits.

The ICRC wants the corn for buffer stock distribution in conjunction with the PMI not later than April.

The Indonesian Government could risk not having buffer stock for the coming months and might get away with nothing worse than food shortages in some regions. But it is a risk — shortages can escalate if conditions become unfavourable.

There are reports that rice and maize crops in Nusatenggara, the eastern Indonesia region comprising the whole Timor island, nearby Flores, Sumba and other islands, are better than expected. If this is the case then it is possible that Indonesian authorities could provide the ICRC and PMI with buffer stocks from the region.

The ICRC takes a different view. It wants the Australian corn.

It understands Indonesian sensitivities over Australian press ventilation of the administrator's letter but points out that the corn was directed to the ICRC not to the Indonesian Government. It takes the view that once the corn reaches the ICRC the fact of where it came from does not concern the Indonesian Government.

Unfortunately this is not how politics works here and whether the corn will be permitted to reach the ICRC remains a sensitive question.

Optimists believe it will. Certainly the ICRC is very anxious to get it as it is not only of high quality but has the inestimable advantage of being already bagged, ready for delivery and geographically close.

Moreover if the Australian corn is not accepted and buffer stocks are in fact unavailable from elsewhere in Indonesia — Timor is not the only food deficient area in the archipelago — then it might not prove all that easy to get a gift of 1,000 tonnes of high grade corn at short notice.

Interested observers here hope that Indonesia's Government will be as tolerant and sensible about what it regards as Australian slights — the press is seen as the main offender — as it has to be over the statements and actions of the apostolic administrator.