



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC RELIEF

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## PRESS RELEASE

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### SERIOUS SITUATION IN EAST TIMOR

Australian Catholic Relief has received an urgent request for assistance from the Apostolic Administrator of Dili, Monsignor Martinho da Costa Lopes.

The request, which was contained in a letter to the Chairman of ACR, Bishop John Gerry, states that food shortages in the island are already serious, and that the people will face famine in 1982 unless substantial outside assistance is forthcoming. Disruption of the island's subsistence economy by the continuing presence of Indonesian troops is blamed for the shortfall in food production.

The Indonesian army, which has occupied the former Portuguese colony since 1975, was recently reported to have mounted an operation in July, August and September of last year which was designed to flush FRETILIN forces from their mountain strongholds and corner them in the central region of Manatutu.

All able-bodied males aged between 15 and 50 were forced to participate in the exercise, forming a human fence which moved through FRETILIN-controlled areas, ensuring that the resistance members and their families would keep on the move.

The operation had two tragic outcomes, one with immediate effect, the other with longer term implications.

The first outcome is that many Timorese were killed, including, according to Monsignor Lopes's letter "innocent children, pregnant women and defenceless people without any crime except the willing to be independent from all oppression." In one incident, at a local shrine known as the rock of St. Anthony, more than 500 Timorese were killed in a siege

lasting four days.

The other outcome of the "human fence" operation was the widespread disruption of agricultural activity. The men were away from their villages at a time when they should have been preparing the ground for planting. Many of those who returned were too weak to work, and what crops were eventually planted were too late. The result will be at best a poor harvest; at worst, famine. This conclusion is inescapable, as the people can now do nothing to increase food production for at least six months. Many deaths from malnutrition and disease can only be prevented by assistance from outside.

Australian Catholic Relief, the official aid and development agency of the Catholic Church in Australia, has been supporting relief operations in East Timor for some years. In 1981, \$70,000 was allocated to the East Timor Emergency and Rehabilitation Programme, and a further \$20,000 has already been committed for 1982.

However, this will come nowhere near meeting the needs of the population. Church relief workers in East Timor have requested \$250,000 by June 1982 to help provide basic food, medicine and accommodation and to provide assistance for orphans.

Since 1975, only two outside organisations have been permitted to operate in East Timor. These are the International Committee of the Red Cross and Catholic Relief Services of the United States. Both were requested to wind up their operations in April 1981. Since then, only the local Catholic Church has been able to organise relief programmes in East Timor, which has a predominantly Catholic population.

ENDS

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