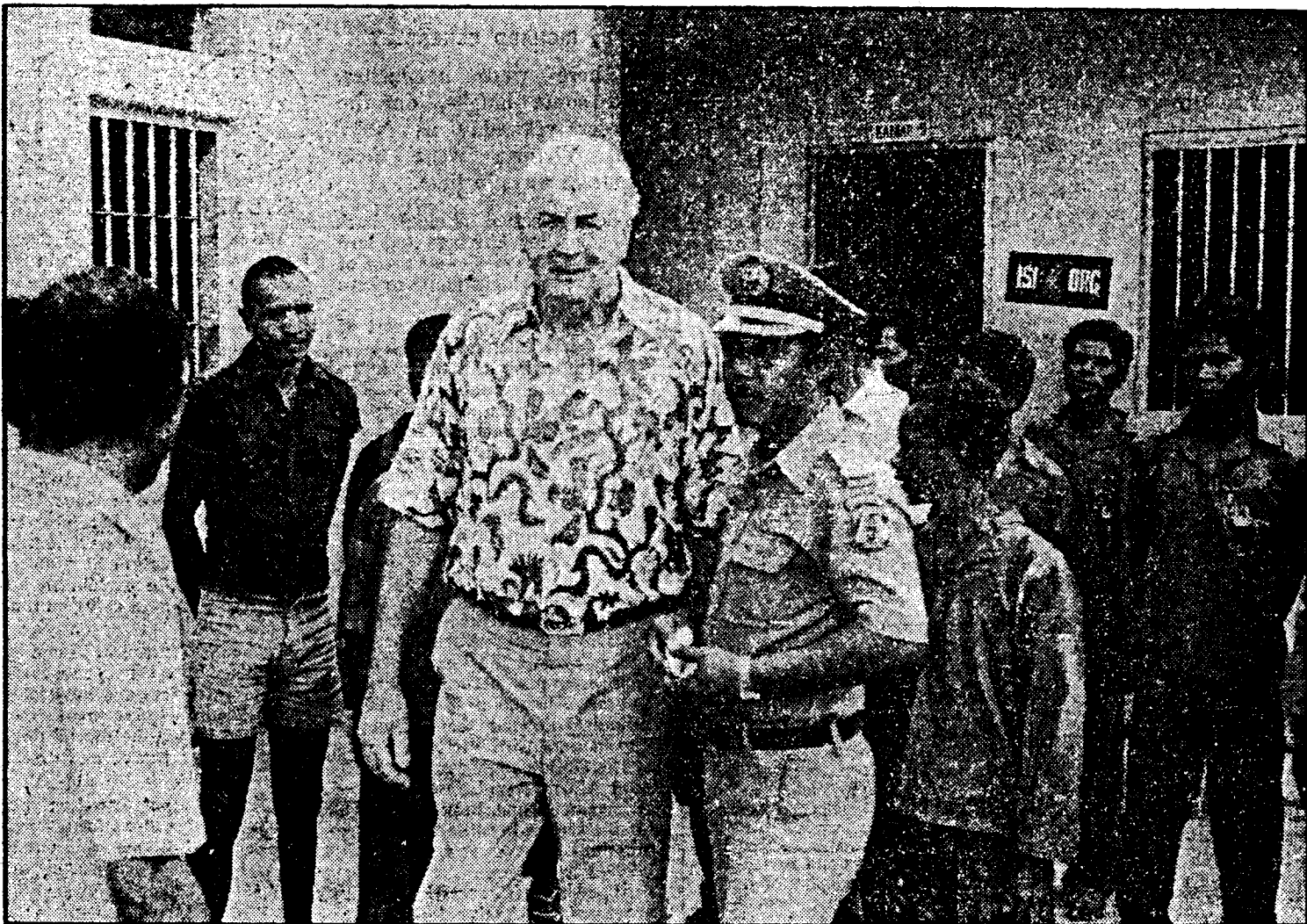


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# Gough walks tall again, even if it's no longer on water



The former Prime Minister, Mr Whitlam, with an Indonesian officer and prisoners in the Comarca, a prison in Dili, East Timor's largest town. He was told there were only 13 political detainees in the jail.

PETER HASTINGS, Herald Foreign Editor, travelled to East Timor last week with the former Prime Minister, Mr Whitlam, on an unofficial four-day visit. He filed this report.

Gough Whitlam returned to the world stage as though he had never left it in the first place.

"Bekas perdana menteri Australia" (former Australian Prime Minister) he unhesitatingly introduced himself wherever he went during his four-day trip to East Timor.

In part this was due to the fact that the Indonesians were particularly helpful wherever he went, not merely for State purposes but because they like his style.

President Soeharto cut short an urgent visit to Solo to return to Jakarta to talk to him before he left for Australia.

Indonesians like him because he likes them, rather too uncritically, perhaps.

But it is a small reservation in ways alone among senior politicians alone among senior politicians on the Right and Left in Australia in taking an active interest in South-East Asia and the Pacific.

He avoided the trap of remaining fixated on the events of 1975 and concentrated on what the Red Cross and other agencies were doing in Timor and on Indonesian plans for the future.

He made a point, for example, of visiting every classroom in each school, asking the same questions of teachers and pupils — how many spoke Portuguese,

how many Tetum (the most widely spoken Timorese language) and how many Indonesian?

He asked where the villages were, if they had been hungry and what they wanted to do.

In Maliana, he noticed on a blackboard algebraic equations being worked on by students of 16 years and above, students who have suffered the catastrophic events of 1975 and after.

How long had algebra been taught, he asked; finally eliciting the answer that in Portuguese times algebra had been taught only in Dili to a fortunate few.

Wherever he went in small centres he took careful note of bush hospitals, their patients and whether they had adequate supplies of drugs.

Whatever he did not understand in questioning Timorese, Indonesians or Red Cross workers, he would patiently go over again.

Sweating profusely in torrid heat he took copious notes with the same impressive speed with which he demolished whatever food was placed in front of him.

He was particularly patient with the Apostolic Administrator, Monsignor Martinho da Costa Lopes, commonly referred to as

the Bishop going over his accusations of Indonesian atrocities and allegations of hunger and deprivation — where was the famine; where had atrocities occurred; how many have been killed; where did the bishop get his information; had he, himself, visited the areas referred to; if so, when?

His general impression at the end of the tour was that allegations of famine were unfounded, that the relative absence of armed forces and the relaxed attitudes of those in bush centres, including doctors, nurses and teachers, indicated that Fretilin was finished as a military force.

The Indonesians in fact answered every question he put to them very fully and with a single exception, permitted him to see all that he asked to see. The exception was six political prisoners in Dili's jail. He did not press his point but noted it in his diary.

On the lighter side, his wit left some Indonesians puzzled.

There are a few English words like confrontation, transmigration and integration which can be rendered as konfrontasi, transmigrasi and integrasi. They are very few.

He astounded Indonesian Ministers with a whole new lexicon of possibilities — televisi, telekommunikasi, disposisi and, rock bottom, incapacitasi.

But for one exchange he gets full marks.

Walking down a bush track in oppressive heat, I remarked that I could think of better things to do.

"I will confess, comrade," he rejoined drily, "that I used to be better on water."

In Canberra yesterday the Australian Council for Overseas Aid rejected reassurances by Mr Whitlam regarding the situation in East Timor.

The executive director of the council, Mr Bob Whan, said the council did not regard Mr Whitlam as an independent observer because he had been "an apologist for the Indonesian Government."

Mr Whan, a former Federal member for Eden-Monaro who served in the Whitlam Government, said the council had called for some time for independent observers — from the United Nations or the International Association of Jurists — to enter East Timor and report on conditions there.

PAGE 3: Irritated Indonesia leaves corn on docks.

PAGE 7: The Timor death toll: one answer that can never be known.