

TUESDAY, JANUARY 12, 1982

Timor trench

THE AUSTRALIAN Government's decision to send East Timor 1,000 tonnes of corn — a decision reached a couple of months ago in response to an earlier International Committee of the Red Cross appeal for buffer food stocks for the area — highlights once again a precarious food situation in Indonesia's poorest province which faces each year potential famine in the first quarter. This was equally true of less disturbed Portuguese times. But taking precautions against possible food shortages, perhaps famine, and saying that the island is virtually heading for famine, and that there are insufficient food stocks to prevent it, are two different things. In view of statements made yesterday by Mr. Michael Whiteley, national director of Australian Catholic Relief, it is proper to question the accuracy and motives of his principal source, Monsignor Martinho da Costa Lopes, the Apostolic Administrator in Dili.

Monsignor da Costa Lopes is a Vatican appointment to Dili. The Vatican does not recognise Indonesia's incorporation of East Timor. The Administrator is, moreover, a Portuguese cleric of pronounced anti-Indonesian views who is badly offside with the Indonesian Catholic hierarchy including the Cardinal. He is certainly right to draw attention to a possible Timorese famine and equally right to point out that if it occurs Indonesians must largely blame their own counter-productive policies. There is no doubt that in the recent operations by Indonesian Army units to clean up Fretilin fragments, able-bodied Timorese males were sent to locate Fretilin guerrillas and, if possible, to persuade them to surrender, when they should have been left on the land to plant crops. In view of the small numbers of Fretilin the involvement of Timorese farmers was pointless — yet another example of Indonesian overkill.

But statements by the Apostolic Administrator and Australian Catholic Relief about looming famine need more substance. They are categorically denied by the Indonesian Embassy in Canberra,

something which cannot be lightly dismissed. They are also denied in more general terms by other sources, including official Australian ones, which claim that although Timor is a famine-prone area, may face a severe food situation over the next quarter, there are enough food stocks on hand around the main centres to prevent famine, though some outlying areas are likely to suffer through distribution problems. But the point at issue is not simply East Timor's food situation. If famine threatens, ways and means can be found to ensure that food reaches the island in sufficient quantities. Moreover Indonesia's Government, with memories of the disastrous 1979 famine, has now a greater capacity to move food in bulk than it ever possessed.

The real point at issue is that East Timor has become a running ulcer in Australian-Indonesian relations. This is not to deny that Indonesians have been their own worst enemy over Timor. There was their touchy, nationalist reluctance to allow international agencies a slice of the action when it was in their interests to allow it. They tend to cover up rather than repair the messes made by bureaucratic bungling. The rights and interests of the Timorese have too often been sacrificed to Jakarta's paranoid preoccupation with an alleged communist Fretilin threat. But by the same token Jakarta has made enormous and largely unremarked efforts not only to repair the damages of annexation but those of four centuries of Portuguese cruelty and colonial neglect in the fields of health, education and agriculture.

Australians tend to look at Indonesia's all too obvious failures and to ignore its many successes. There is a danger in this, in Australia's nagging, relentless criticism of the Timor affair over a result that Australians in any case increasingly recognise as having been inevitable once Portugal abdicated responsibility for its former colony. The danger is that what we may like to think is only a temporary estrangement of two neighbours may become permanent.