

Out of the hills comes Timor's tragedy

THE hungry children of Remexio are sitting in two large circles in the dust singing a haunting song when we arrive by Indonesian Army helicopter from Dili.

The melody is disconcertingly similar to "If I Were an Apple on a Tree," but Mario Carrascalao tells me differently.

"The words are like those of most Timorese folk songs," says the East Timorese political leader who is now a senior official with the Indonesian Foreign Ministry.

"They are singing that life is so difficult that they believe it will get better."

Near the children a Portuguese monument has been pitted with the miniature craters of machine-gun fire.

Remexio was still occupied by Fretilin guerrillas last year.

Two hundred metres down the tiny settlement's powdered-dust main tracks is a disused old colonial stone building converted to a makeshift hospital by Indonesian medical teams.

Stretcher

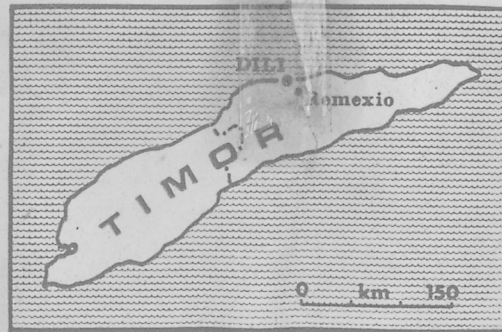
In two rooms there are trays of vitamins and anti-biotics in tablet and injection form which have arrived too late to save 76 of the 4164 men, women and children of Remexio.

In another room a young woman lies on a stretcher, one arm is bandaged with a drip in it, and her wide eyes are aware of death.

She is in an advanced state of malnutrition and suffering from either TB or cholera or both. Her arm is thinner than a small child's. When you read this she will almost certainly be dead.

Remexio is now an Indonesian Government resettlement centre for those who have come back down from the mountains where they fled to escape the bloody civil war of 1975 and the following Indonesian invasion.

Those of the 4164 who have been there long enough are lining the track to welcome 10 foreign ambassadors, the first foreign newsmen to visit the town and their host party of Indonesian and East Timorese government officials. Provincial home guardsmen



From RICHARD GILL who accompanied foreign ambassadors on a visit to Indonesian-ruled East Timor. They were taken to Remexio, a resettlement centre for the starving Timorese who have come out of the hills.

move up and down the lines as the people clap and shout "Merdeka" (freedom). But there are no smiles.

On the slope above the track are the little thatched huts where the people are living temporarily until they can be resettled either in their former homes or somewhere else after three months here.

"They sleep on the floor at night," one official tells me "It gets very cold here at night and respiratory diseases are a major problem."

Farther down the track an In-

donesian Red Cross truck is almost swamped by 200 people who have only just arrived from the mountains.

The men and women are only half clothed and starving, but the children are worse.

Many are naked and most have the piercing gaze, emaciated limbs and distended bellies of advanced malnutrition.

The home guardsmen are using sticks and stones trying to keep the people in an orderly queue to wait for the first clothes and nut-

ritious food they have seen for months.

But the people can perceive the obvious: There is only enough this time for half of them.

Up the hill is one of the few visible signs of a Portuguese administration which ruled the province for five centuries. It is a Catholic church.

The front of the church is spattered with machinegun pockmarks.

Adults and children pour out of the church. They have been in Remexio longer, living on a ra-

tion of 400 g of rice a day for the first three days and 600 g of maize for the next three months, together with milk, beans and other food airlifted in by the Indonesians.

Their condition is better by far than that of the newer arrivals, but it is still bad.

During three days in East Timor I do not see one person who could be described as fat.

Since the Indonesian takeover and subsequent amnesty last year for former Fretilin supporters, more than 125,000 people have come back down from the hills, according to Jakarta government figures.

Another 5000 are estimated to be still there under varying degrees of intimidation by Fretilin remnants or, as Mario puts it, "too scared or too ignorant" to return to their farms and villages.

Inside the newly-roofed Remexio sub-district community centre Fretilin slogans including "Fretilin the conquerors" daubed in Portuguese on the walls have been thinly painted over.

A man wearing a new T-shirt walks away from the Red Cross truck holding an Indonesian flag and a pair of brilliant red shorts.

There are thousands of the red and white flags with nearly everyone holding one and hundreds more lining the track.

Sad-faced

Children lining the track are singing "Indonesia Raya" — the national anthem — as we walk back to the helicopter. Their sad-faced demonstration of loyalty has obviously been well-rehearsed.

The other children are still singing their song of hope in Tetum, the native Timorese dialect.

"There's certainly no question about whether these people will be better off under the Indonesians than they were under the Portuguese," one ambassador observes on the way back. "The Portuguese have a lot to answer for."

"And seeing these people makes a mockery of any suggestion for a United Nations referendum."

Mario Carrascalao puts it better with brutally frank understatement.

"I don't really think that these people know what they are doing."

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