

Timor action: another report

FEARs which many Australians had held for three years about the condition of the East Timorese, were confirmed last Saturday. The findings of ambassadors and Australian journalists visiting the territory began to appear in Australian newspapers. They told of starving, diseased, and half-clothed refugees they had found in the mountains. Despite the cold at night, many children are naked. They show plain evidence of advanced malnutrition.

Tens of thousands are displaced from their homes and dependent in a poor country with almost no economic structure. As all this is happening less than an hour's flight from Australia, in an area far from Indonesian sources of supply, the Australian ambassador offered help.

Immediate, positive reaction might have been expected here — at least a Foreign Affairs request to Defence to put RAAF and RAN units on standby to move in food, medicine, and clothing while the necessary Indonesian clearances were sought urgently. Instead, we wait for another report.

This is an emergency in which Australia should take the initiative, and should be seen internationally to do so, without worrying about who is to blame. When it comes to Australian responsibility over East Timor, a theme results: not too little too late, but just — nothing.