

CATHOLIC COMMISSION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

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PRESS RELEASE

EAST TIMOR

The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, today released the text of a letter to the Prime Minister and to the Minister for Foreign Affairs on the subject of the Australian Government's handling of the East Timor issue.

The letter is critical of recent actions on the part of the Australian Government and argues that there is "serious conflict" between these actions and the Government's stated policy on East Timor. The actions referred to are: 1) Australia's abstention from voting at the United Nations "on a General Assembly resolution, the substance of which was in complete agreement with the stated policy of the Australian Government", 2) the directive to Telecom(Darwin) announced on November 15 not to pass on any messages received from East Timor to addresses in Australia and 3) the seizure of a radio transmitter on September 17 used to maintain contact with East Timor.

The Commission's Secretary, Mr. Mauro Di Nicola, to-day stated that the Commission found the Government's recent actions difficult to understand, "especially in view of the previously stated policy, which had received wide support from all sections of the Australian community."

Mr. Di Nicola revealed that the Commission had received information from "highly reliable sources", corroborating recent reports that the Indonesian forces control, only the main towns and villages in East Timor, amounting to a total population of between 120,000 - 150,000 people; "This confirms that there are approximately 500,000 people, or about 75% of the total population, in Fretilin held areas".

Source: TIS Archives Folder 1c1

It was also stated in the letter that the Indonesian Red Cross is distributing relief supplies only in areas under Indonesian control. Mr. Di Nicola continued, "One can only assume that the situation of the 500,000 people not under Indonesian control is critical with respect to food, clothing and medical supplies; this situation is soon to worsen with the onset of the wet season."

"The Commission believes that in view of this information and in view of the Government's stated policy, the Australian Government should renew its efforts in pressing for international humanitarian aid to be allowed into East Timor. It also strongly believes that communication links with the whole of East Timor should be maintained", Mr. Di Nicola said.

The letter called on the Government to clearly and unambiguously re-state its policy on East Timor and to pursue this policy in all relevant forums, especially key international ones such as the U.N.

The letter also urged the Government to give top priority to East Timorese refugees now in Portugal, "We have a special responsibility in this case", Mr. Di Nicola said, "and most of the East Timorese refugees in Portugal are reported to have expressed a strong desire to come to Australia."