

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Whitlam and the Timor debate

THE BULLETIN of March 30 stirred up a hornet's nest with an exclusive report from former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam on current conditions in East Timor. Whitlam, visiting East Timor in March on an itinerary arranged by the International Committee of the Red Cross, found that the conditions of the people of East Timor were ~~now~~ much better than before the civil war of 1975 or the famine of 1978. He rebutted allegations of famine and called upon Australians to aid their government in supporting present efforts in East Timor by the Red Cross and UNICEF.

The article aroused several letters from readers, many of them with a strong anti-Indonesian tone. The arguments against Whitlam are best summed up in the letters of two writers, Shirley Shackleton, widow of one of the five newsmen killed during the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, and Labor MP Ken Fry.

The Bulletin this week publishes the letters of Shackleton and Fry, together with Whitlam's reply. We hope the letters and reply will throw some light on the East Timor issue, which has bedevilled Australian-Indonesian relations since 1975.

Truth buried with the bodies

FROM Shirley Shackleton: I am the widow of one of the Australian journalists killed in Timor. For the past four years I have worked to raise money to establish a memorial scholarship in memory of my husband and his colleagues. The first Greg Shackleton scholar was announced on April 6. The winner, Geraldine Brookes, will travel to the US to take up studies at Columbia University later this year.

Now that the scholarship has been established I feel free to work on behalf of the Timorese and I write this, not as the widow of Greg Shackleton but as an Australian citizen who wishes to assist any Timorese who survived the slaughter and famine which have racked Timor since the Indonesian invasion.

I have followed the articles reported in the Australian Press of the Whitlam/Hastings visit closely. The debate depends on one's definition of the word famine and the allegation that the apostolic administrator in Dili, Monsignor Martinho da Costa Lopes, has lied (Gough Whitlam, B, March 30).

"The Bishop" did not claim that famine was present in Timor, he warned that famine was possible. His con-



Gough Whitlam: a trenchant reply to critics of his East Timor report

clusions were drawn from his knowledge of agricultural factors coupled with his outrage and frustration regarding military operations described by Peter Hastings (*Canberra Times*, March 12) as "frankly disastrous as well as inhumane. Throughout the middle and

spring months of last year an alleged 50,000 Timorese men (certainly not less than 30,000 men) 16 years and up, were taken to the hills to contact Fretilin groups and to discuss amnesty possibilities. The operation was not only clumsy but completely counter-productive. It resulted in a few surrenders and took thousands of able-bodied men away from the urgent needs of planting and other village duties."

The survivors of the operation returned to their families sick and completely undernourished according to "the Bishop." Viewed in this light his claims are understandable.

If by famine your definition is "food shortage severe enough to cause health problems and risk of death" consider a further report by Hastings (*Canberra Times*): "There are certainly pockets of population short of food in a desperately poor island. There is also a perennial risk of severe food shortage leading to famine in the first three months of every year." These and many other factors known to "the Bishop" add to the grim picture.

In assuring us that there is no famine coming to Timor, Gough Whitlam has not taken into account any of the following:

- The East Timorese have been moved from their traditional areas where crops grow readily.
- The resettlement areas were chosen

for strategic gains not agricultural merits.

- The East Timorese have always been subsistence farmers. They have never grown crops for sale and are not accustomed to buying food. They are not used to having money. What little they had came from the coffee plantations or odd jobs. The Indonesians have forbidden any internal trading of coffee except to a company set up by Indonesian generals.

- Travel is restricted. For security reasons *surat jalan* (travel permits) are required. This is to prevent the Timorese from aiding Fretilin, but it also cuts Timorese off from food purchasing areas. The great difficulty in obtaining travel permits introduces graft common to Indonesians, but totally unacceptable to the Timorese way of life. *Their lack of graft and their honesty cannot be over-emphasised.* In many cases the mere application for a travel permit places them under suspicion of being pro-Fretilin. This prevents them from applying.

By moving the people into strategically important areas, the Indonesians have created pockets of overcrowding. They have compounded all the natural hazards common to farming in Timor. If there is a grasshopper plague or a rat plague or insufficient rainfall the crops

will fail. These are common in Timor.

Indonesia's petty refusal to accept Australian buffer stocks makes one wonder if they are fit for the task of domination over the Timorese.

The Indonesians are capable of great kindness and they may mean well in Timor but they are also capable of brutality and absolute stupidity, as evidence confirms.

The Bishop of Dili has seen human misery visited upon his people. Peter Hastings in reporting the death rate (*Sydney Morning Herald*, March): "Estimates have varied widely from a low of 100,000 and less to half the island's population."

What Australians can't stomach is Gough Whitlam's eagerness to accept that "conditions of the people of East Timor are much better than before the civil war of 1975 and the famine of 1978" (B, March 30).

His list of "improvements" includes the fact that he saw four tractors in Dili! He also reports to have seen buildings, roads, fish farms and an irrigation system. As though such material gains could replace self-determination to a people who are traditionally known for their complete disregard for material wealth.

Australians can't help wondering what Mr Whitlam might have seen had

he the power to set the helicopter down in areas other than those where he was expected.

Anyone seeking clarification of the Timorese situation must share my bitter disappointment that Whitlam appears to be bending over backwards to bathe the Indonesians in a rosy hue.

If all is well in Timor, why have the Indonesians consistently denied admission to people like Harry Martin from Community Aid Abroad, or Cliff Morris. Mr Morris was in Timor during World War II. He has been working on a dictionary of Tetum to assist the Timorese. He has been refused entry into Timor twice so far. He, among many Australians, would be quite happy for the Indonesians to take over if that is what the Timorese want.

The terrible truth and one which Whitlam can't deny is that they have never been given the chance to speak on their own behalf.

In attempting to become chief apologist for the Indonesian invasion of Timor, Whitlam dismisses without a murmur the hundreds of thousands of East Timorese who died horribly. Having made a terrible mistake Gough Whitlam appears to be busy, busy, busy seeking to cover it up.

As a Timorese said to me recently: "The sad fact about Timor is that the

truth, along with the bodies, is always buried."

SHIRLEY SHACKLETON
Melbourne Vic

An exercise in self-justification

FROM Ken Fry: As an exercise in self-justification and apology for Indonesian brutality and aggression in East Timor, Mr Whitlam's recent visit to East Timor could be seen as a great success which will please the Indonesian sponsors of the visit.

The opening assertion of Mr Whitlam's article in *The Bulletin* that "The conditions of the people of East Timor are much better than before the civil war of 1975" is not confirmed by the account of his very superficial inspection.

Mr Whitlam did not visit East Timor in 1975. I was there on two occasions. They were then subject to Portuguese authority, which despite the benign neglect, could not be accused of the brutality and repression of the present military dominated Indonesian administration.

The International Red Cross representatives who accompanied Mr Whitlam on his lightning tour have not, to my knowledge, endorsed his view. Their assessment is that there were no obvious famine conditions in the centres which they visited at that time.

This assessment is consistent with the church and relief observers who expressed fears about the possibility of famine in some regions of East Timor later this year due to seasonal conditions and the interruption of some planting operations due to Indonesian military activity.

On this particular point I recently asked Mr Whitlam whether he had visited six specific areas of East Timor which had been identified by church relief authorities where famine conditions may occur later this year. The locations specified were Venilace, Vemassee, Viqueque, Laleia, Ainaro, Soibada. Mr Whitlam admitted that he had visited none of these areas.

It is dishonest and deliberately misleading to imply that church relief spokesmen had claimed that famine conditions prevailed in parts of East Timor at this time. The church spokesmen were acting responsibly in signalling a future problem rather than waiting until it was upon them.

It is simplistic to attribute the Catholic clergy's long standing support for the people of East Timor to a nostalgia for former times. Their support has frequently involved displays of consider-

able courage and fortitude in standing up to and speaking about gross brutality against the Timorese by the Indonesian administration.

I have no doubt that conditions have improved in East Timor since the 1978 famine period. So they should have after more than six years of occupation and substantial international aid; but to accept that all is well on the basis of a very shallow, speedy and stage-managed inspection by Mr Whitlam is an exercise in self-delusion.

If we accept the Whitlam report as the "truth" about East Timor we will be doing a great disservice to the people of East Timor, by encouraging their supporters to drop their cause in the unsubstantiated belief that their brutal and aggressive overlords are treating them well.

Mr Whitlam has consistently adopted an accommodating posture on the illegal Indonesian occupation with little regard for the rights of the East Timorese people. As a member of the Australian Labor Party I publicly disassociate myself from his report.

The public should suspend their judgment on East Timor at least until evidence is heard by the Senate Standing Committee Enquiry on Human Rights in East Timor which begins shortly. I am confident that a much more balanced picture will emerge from a wider range of evidence.

KEN FRY, MP
Member for Fraser
Parliament House Canberra



Ken Fry: Whitlam has shown little regard for the rights of the East Timorese

mittees might check the facts with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and/or US Catholic Relief Services (CRS), which have been in the province since April, 1979, and/or with the apostolic pro-nuncio who had spent 10 days there last June.

Mr Fry is much more strident in your columns than he was in committee. He gives your readers the benefit of views which he did not venture to express before his peers and to my face. His afterthoughts are spurious. He now says that I made a "very superficial inspection," "lightning tour" and "very shallow, speedy and stage-managed inspection." The facts are I spent four days in the province in the course of which I visited eight centres by helicopter. Secondly, he cites the "Indonesian sponsors of the visit." The facts are that the itinerary was arranged by the ICRC, I flew in ICRC helicopters and I was accompanied throughout by the ICRC delegate who has been in the province since 1979 and who had taken round the secretary-general of the Australian Red Cross Society by helicopter. Thirdly, he describes my presentation as "an exercise in self-justification and apology," "dishonest and deliberately misleading" and "an exercise in self-delusion."

I relied in my *Bulletin* article on the published ICRC quarterly reports, a personal briefing by the ICRC team on

February 28, a widely reported ICRC Press conference on March 4 and a CRS document of February 1. Furthermore, I produced these documents to the committee members together with our ambassador's report on the discussions to which he accompanied me.

By contrast Mr Fry made two visits to East Timor back in 1975. In March he visited two or three places. In September he visited three places in a plane owned and piloted by an undercover ASIS operative. On the second visit East Timor was no longer "subject to Portuguese authority," as he writes, but was occupied by Fretilin forces which, thanks to the weapons left them by the decamping Portuguese, had subdued their political rivals and caused an exodus of 40,000 refugees.

Since 1975 Mr Fry has maintained his contacts with Fretilin. In April, 1979, Mozambique, which was playing host to Fretilin as a government in exile, requested the Security Council to invite him to appear before it. This was heady stuff for a man who had been less than two years in parliament. In May and June, 1979, he missed the last 11 days and the last 35 votes of the parliamentary session to go to Lisbon to address a conference attended by, among others, the ambassadors from the five former Portuguese African colonies which recognise Fretilin as the government of East Timor. In June, 1981, he was again in Lisbon as a "witness" before a 10 member "jury" which was backed by the same former colonies and which found that Fretilin's UDI in November, 1975, was valid in international law. None of these expeditions were undertaken under the auspices of a parliamentary committee or the Australian Labor Party.

Mr Fry, like many politicians — and academics too — has long realised that East Timor is the easiest subject upon which to gain exposure in the Australian media. He refuses to realise that the Fretilin faction, to whose interests he has devoted so much emotion and effort, long ago lost all significant support in East Timor and everywhere else in Southern Asia and the Western Pacific. He and many of a like mind fail to realise that they have opted out of any role in building the future of the people of East Timor.

The Senate committee was established on November 26. Mrs Shackleton has had ample time to give it any information she has. The value of her information would depend on her sources. She should identify them. I have already given my information to the Senate committee. I identified my sources at the meeting in Parliament House on March 23.

E. G. WHITLAM
Sydney NSW

Fretilin support has evaporated

GOUGH WHITLAM replies: At Parliament House, Canberra, on Tuesday, March 23, I spent one and three-quarter hours at their request with the members of the Joint Committee and half the members of the Senate's Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence to discuss my visit to East Timor. I have agreed to give evidence before a public meeting of the full Senate Committee in Sydney on May 14.

Among the committee members who were present was Mr Fry. It was in committee that he asked me whether I had visited "six specific areas identified by church relief authorities where famine conditions might occur later in this year." I said I had not. (He already knew this from Mr Hastings' articles in *The Sydney Morning Herald*.) I pointed out that the areas had not been visited by the apostolic administrator, who is the source of the allegations of possible famine. I suggested that he or the com-