

Priest's tale of woe could cost Timor aid

From PETER HASTINGS, of the Sydney Morning Herald, in Jakarta

INDONESIA has not decided whether to accept an Australian offer of 1000 tonnes of corn for use as buffer stock in East Timor.

Indonesia's stand follows publicity in Australia given to the release by Australian Catholic Relief of parts of a letter from the Apostolic Administrator in Dili, Monsignor Martinho da Costa Lopes, which forecast widespread famine in June.

The official Indonesian position is that Dili's warehouses are full and there is no room for the corn. This is untrue. While the warehouses have food and other stock in them there is plenty of room for corn. The real reason for the present uncertain situation is Jakarta's continuing anger over the credence given by Australian Catholic Relief to Monsignor da Costa Lopes's letter, which the Government claims was mischievous and false.

The letter was certainly inaccurate and mischievous in that when the administrator wrote the letter predicting famine he knew without doubt that the Indonesian administration, the Indonesian Red Cross and the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva — those responsible for handling famine — disagreed with him. He knew also that the Red Cross had already successfully negotiated 500 tonnes of Australian corn as buffer stock and was negotiating another 500 tonnes, a fact he failed to mention in his letter.

But while the administrator's actions are one thing, the fate of 1000 tonnes of corn worth \$340,000 and lying in sheds on a Brisbane wharf when it should be in Dili warehouses is very much another.

The formal position is that the corn was made over by the Australian Government as a gift to the international Red Cross for disbursement as buffer stock in East Timor in conjunction with the Indonesian Red Cross.

Although the Indonesian Red Cross is autonomous, in major policy matters it is subject to direction by the Indonesian Government. The Government approved the Australian gift late last year and Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Street, made a public statement about it.

After Australian Press reports and editorial comment on the bishop's letter early this year the Indonesian Government reversed its decision to allow the gift. Mr Street announced later that the corn offer had been withdrawn but added that the Australian Government would still offer any assistance required.

Members of the Indonesian Government who wish the corn deal to go ahead refer to the Australian withdrawal as a postponement.

In a sense it is, as Mr Street suggested. But they have their fingers crossed.

There are problems ahead. While corn lasts longer than some grains in storage there are limits. The Red Cross wants the corn by April. The Indonesian Government could risk not having buffer stock and might get away with nothing worse than regional food shortages. But it is risky.

There are reports that rice and maize crops in Nusatenggara, the eastern Indonesia region which includes Timor, nearby Flores, Sumba and other islands, are better than expected. If this is the case then it is possible that Indonesian authorities could provide the two Red Cross organisations with buffer stocks from the region.

The international Red Cross takes a different view. It wants the Australian corn. It understands Indonesian sensitivities over the Australian Press reports but points out that the corn was given to the Red Cross not to the Indonesian Government. It takes the view that once the corn reaches the International Red Cross the fact of where it came from does not concern the Indonesian Government.

Unfortunately this is not how politics works in Indonesia and whether the corn will be permitted to reach the Red Cross remains a sensitive question. Optimists believe it will. Certainly the Red Cross is very anxious to get it as it is not only of high quality but has the advantage of being already bagged, ready for delivery and geographically nearby.

Moreover, if the Australian corn is not accepted and buffer stocks are unavailable in Indonesia — Timor is not the only food deficient area in the archipelago — then it might not prove all that easy to get a gift of 1000 tonnes of high grade corn at short notice, not even from the United States.

Interested observers hope that Indonesia's Government will be as tolerant and sensible about what it regards as Australian slights — the Press is seen as the main offender — as it has to be over the statements and actions of the Apostolic Administrator.

The Government has been sensible about and tolerant of Monsignor da Costa Lopes, for several reasons. In the first place Indonesia's constitution calls for religious non-discrimination. All religions have an equal right to flourish under the law and under the basic Pancasila state philosophy.

Despite pressures, sometimes intense, on the part of Islamic extremists and fundamentalists for a more openly Islamic Indonesia, the Indonesian Government steadfastly pursued a policy of religious tolerance.

In its predominantly or significantly Christian provinces it has been extremely careful not to interfere with religious practice or the rights of the clergy. While in Irian Jaya it has permitted the access of Islamic priests to Christian communities, in East Timor it has kept them out by one stratagem and another, mainly by pleading an unsettled security situation.

In the second place the Government is keenly aware that any tension between Moslems and Christians in East Timor before the coming elections could only strengthen the hand of Islamic parties.

In the third place, Jakarta is very alert that the post of Apostolic Administrator in Dili is a Vatican appointment. The Vatican, as a sovereign State, does not recognise Indonesia's incorporation of the province.

For this reason while the Indonesian Government (and for that matter the Indonesian Catholic hierarchy in Jakarta and other Indonesian centres) might well wish to be rid of the turbulent

priest in Dili, it knows it will have to wait.

The Papal Nuncio in Jakarta, the Most Reverend Pablo Puente, is a very cautious experienced diplomat who observes a great deal and says very little — at least publicly. But it would not surprise many in Jakarta if at the end of this year the Apostolic Administrator is recalled and replaced by an Indonesian bishop.

The people most deserving of sympathy in the present standoff over corn are the hard working international Red Cross representatives who, together with a band of dedicated Indonesian Red Cross workers, have saved the lives of at least 100,000 people in the 14 or so affected Timorese villages by a systematic distribution of food, drugs and expert medical care.

In an operation costing more than \$12 million the two Red Cross organisations over the past three years have shifted thousands of tonnes of food and drugs by Hercules aircraft, helicopters, ships and trucks.

At the height of the operation the ICRC and PMI employed six Mercedes trucks, four Land Rovers, one Norman Islander, two Alouette helicopters and one Bell 205 helicopter while the (US) Catholic Relief Services lent ships and barges for transport of food and drugs to warehouses in famine-stricken areas such as Laga.

At its busiest period the joint Indonesian-international Red Cross operation employed 194 people, including a resident Swiss doctor and nine Indonesian doctors.

As the chief Asian delegate to the international Red Cross, Mr David Delapraz, reported last week, there is no longer a famine situation in East Timor. As a result the international Red Cross will begin to scale down operations but keep a monitoring role until at least the end of this year.

With the welcome appearance of UNICEF in June the aid scene will become increasingly internationalised and other UN bodies will begin to make an appearance.

There is no doubt that Indonesia now has a story to tell. It would be a dreadful, counterproductive waste of all its efforts and those of others, if it does not begin to allow more foreign journalists and observers in to see for themselves.

While some will never forgive East Timor's incorporation most will see in new roads, resettlement villages and new crops, and above all in the schools, a better future for the Timorese in Indonesia than they could have dreamt of in the past under Portugal.

Peter Hastings, foreign editor of the 'Sydney Morning Herald,' is visiting Indonesia at the invitation of the Indonesian Embassy.