

E.G. WHITLAM: Interviewed by Richard Andrews (Radio Australia) and broadcast on ABC Radio "Frontline", Friday 26th March 1982.

Paula Nagle:

"Australia's former prime minister Mr Gough Whitlam has spoken publicly for the first time about his recent visit to the Indonesian province of East Timor. Mr Whitlam was prime minister at the time of the first Indonesian military incursion into the former Portuguese colony in October 1975, and although his government was dismissed before Indonesia completed its takeover of East Timor, Mr Whitlam has been widely criticised for not doing enough to prevent it.

The former prime minister's recent visit to East Timor was at the invitation of the Indonesian government. On his return he hit out at Australia's reports of alleged Indonesian atrocities and famine in the province - reports which he said were based on lies. In this exclusive interview, Radio Australia's Richard Andrews is talking with Mr Whitlam.

Q: Mr Whitlam, earlier this year there was a report from Monsignor Lopes, the Apostolic Administrator of Dili, that famine was expected in Timor unless there was substantial outside help, and the Indonesian presence was blamed. Following your visit to Timor, what's your assessment of the situation?

W: I believe there is no threat of famine in East Timor. I believe that Mgr Lopes didn't tell the truth, and he knew that he was not telling the truth. I had a couple of hours almost with him in Dili, and I went through with him the food position in East Timor. He wrote this letter to the Australian Catholic bishops in November from Jakarta. Before he left Dili for Jakarta, he had discussed the situation with the International Red Cross representative, Mr Neukomm, who has been the International Red Cross delegate in Indonesia since July 1979. Mr Neukomm told Mgr what was being done to secure a buffer stock in case there was any weather fluctuations which produced a shortage of food in East Timor. On the 13th November, Mgr da Costa Lopes met the Catholic bishops from Indonesia in Jakarta. He was told that a buffer stock had been arranged. On the 19th of November, he and the bishops had an audience with President Suharto: Mgr Lopes had the opportunity to raise the prospect of famine with the President. He did not do so. The mgr nevertheless wrote this alarmist, inaccurate letter to the Australian bishops, and this has done a great deal of harm to relations between the Australian and Indonesian governments, and the Australian and Indonesian peoples.

The monsignor also admitted to me (and of course he's also said it to the Red Cross) that he hasn't been to any of the areas of East Timor where he says there is a likelihood of famine. And when he is asked to identify any villages where famine is likely to occur, he has not been able to specify the villages.

Q: Well, why did he write the letter then, if you say the claims are untrue?

W: I believe that the bishop is suffering a crisis of identity. He does not realise that the days of the Portuguese - under whom he received his education, under whom he was the deputy, the member of parliament for Timor for some period in the national assembly in Lisbon - that those days are past. And he (and I regret to say, up to half the clergy, at least half the clergy in Timor) are nostalgic: they miss the Portuguese. They were used to the Portuguese language, they were used to the Portuguese tradition, they were part of the Portuguese system. And it upsets the bishop and these clergy when they come to realise that Indonesia is now doing much more for the people of East Timor than the Portuguese ever did.

Q: You've questioned the credibility of Mgr Lopes, but...

W: Oh yes! I say he's a liar. He is a mendacious and malicious correspondent...

Q: But your credibility has also been questioned in this matter. For example, the former Australian consul to East Timor, Mr Dunn, has said that you have constantly displayed an attitude sympathetic to President Suharto...

W: Mr Dunn was last in East Timor in November 1975. He was there on behalf of the Australian Council for Overseas Aid. At that time, with all the Portuguese weapons they'd been given, Fretilin had overrun the country and had driven 40,000 refugees into West Timor. Mr Dunn got too close to Fretilin, and ever since, he's been carrying a torch, waving a flag for Fretilin. Now, if one wants to look at the situation now, Mr Dunn is of no assistance at all. Nor of course is the Australian Council for Overseas Aid - we call it ACFOA - it's of no assistance either. The situation in East Timor has been completely transformed since the International Red Cross and the American Catholic Relief Services went there in 1979. They commenced full-scale operations in July 1979. By April 1981, both the American Catholic Relief Services and the International Red Cross said that the emergency situation in health and food was over in East Timor.

But if you doubt what I say about it, ask the International Red Cross, ask the American Catholic Relief Services, ask the church superiors of the monsignor. None of them back the mgr who is still in Dili, and hardly ever gets out of it, never goes out of it to speak of. Don't rely on Mr Dunn, who was last there over six years ago, and is still a spokesman for Fretilin.

Q: But despite what you say, isn't it a fact that the Indonesian government actually invited you to come to Timor, doesn't that suggest that they were expecting a sympathetic hearing?

W: No, well, I'm glad you raise this: it is not true. I paid my fare to Indonesia. I was taken around East Timor by the International Red Cross. In Jakarta, I was briefed by an Indonesian body, the council for the Centre for Strategic and International Studies. I also of course while I was in Jakarta called on the acting Foreign Minister Panggabean, President Suharto and the Apostolic Pro Nuncio, Archbishop Pablo Puente. Of course I called on senior Indonesians, but I was there in East Timor entirely under the auspices of the International Red Cross.

Now you can say on Radio Australia or you can say on the Australian Broadcasting Commission, which provides ammunition for Radio Australia, you can say things about my credibility. But Radio Australia is not going to cast aspersions on the credibility of the International Red Cross, or the American Catholic Relief Services, or the Apostolic Pro Nuncio. I've mentioned all these people: think what you like about me, but listen to what they say; read what they write.

Q: Well then, how do you respond to the claims that the situation in East Timor is a lot worse than it used to be, that we hear of atrocities, corruption, exploitation of the local people....

W: Now the only source, the only source for those allegations on Radio Australia, on the ABC, in any of the Australian media, is this letter from the monsignor in Dili....

Q: Well then, would you deny all the reports of atrocities in East Timor? Would you deny the claims that one hundred thousand people have died as a result of the Indonesian takeover?

W: Ah well, I'm in no position to say how many people have died. What I do remember of course is that the Vice-Governor of East Timor, Francisco Xavier Lopes da Cruz said early in 1976 that there were 60,000 victims of the war, that is

the civil war which was won with Portuguese weapons by Fretilin, and then the second civil war, which was won by all the other parties with the assistance of the Indonesians. He said 60,000 victims: that then was said to be 60,000 deaths. You've mentioned Mr Gunn, er Dunn, he has of course said there are hundreds of thousands, and there's one notorious academic at the University of Adelaide who's said there were between a quarter of a million and 360,000. The easiest way to get publicity for any person in public life or at a university or in parliament in Australia on public affairs, international affairs is to make an attack on Indonesia. Because people like Radio Australia and the Australian Broadcasting Commission and the various media will print those statements quite uncritically. You yourself have had some experience on Radio Australia but what credibility do you have, because you have given interviews in the past on the basis of what Australian Catholic Relief has said, solely on the basis of a letter from the monsignor. You didn't check up with International Red Cross, you didn't check up with the Australian Red Cross Society, you didn't check up with the Catholic Relief Services of the United States. That is, there are people who've been operating in East Timor, international bodies of undoubted effectiveness and credibility - they've been there for 2½ years or more now - and you didn't check up with them.

You took as gospel something said by a malcontent monsignor, who is not endorsed by any of his seniors and who has been exposed by the people in East Timor - the international organisations who don't just stay in big houses in Dili but who get round the country and do something for the people of that country. The situation in East Timor - health, food - has been transformed since the middle of 1979, and people who still have a grouch from 1975 peddle their lies which have now been exposed.

Q: Given your description of the improvements which have taken place in Timor, do you therefore justify Indonesia's presence there?

W: I am convinced that what the Indonesian government is now doing in East Timor - I've never been there before - but what it's now doing is visibly beneficial: it will produce a long-term improvement in the conditions of the people in East Timor, which they could never have hoped for previously.

There's no denying the evidence of one's own eyes: there are new schools, including secondary schools; there are new or reconstructed hospitals and dispensaries; there is now many more kilometres of asphalt road; and there is proper provision for increasing the variety and amount of food...

Q: We all know there is more to life than just food: what about the right to self-determination?

W: It is not now a practical situation for change. You must accept the situation - the Australian government long ago came to that point of view. I don't support the Australian government. I suppose none of your listeners have any illusions that I support the Australian government in general, I don't. But it came to the view a few years ago, I think it was four years ago, that it should recognise the *de jure*, that is the legal incorporation of East Timor in the Republic of Indonesia. Now I don't disagree with the Australian government; that is, the people who are criticising the Indonesian government, the people who were there last six years or more ago, they are stooges of Fretilin. "