

Prepared for Richard Alston

General recommendation: the main aim, I take it, is to set the record straight vis-a-vis ACFOA; therefore, I suggest we correct Whitlam rather than attack him. I realise there's too much here for a single letter but over-supply allows you to chose your best arrows...

1. Whitlam: "Two months ago there were reports of renewed famine in East Timor". (col. 1 p. 79)

Whatever the media may have said or conveyed, neither Mgr Lopes nor ACR said there was a famine in East Timor.

What ACR said, quoting the Monsignor, was: "Food shortages in the island are already serious, and the people will face famine in 1982 unless substantial outside assistance is forthcoming". (Direct quote from ACR press release 6.1.82)

Mr Hastings, who accompanied Mr Whitlam to East Timor, made substantially the same assessment asserting there is "a perennial risk of severe food shortage leading to famine in the first three months of every year" and displaying apprehension over the refusal of the Indonesian Government to permit Australian food aid to go to East Timor.

2. Whitlam: "Leading the crusade against Indonesia has been the Australian Council for Overseas Aid, which forged links with Fretilin in October, 1975". (col. 2, p. 80)

Three clarifications:

- a. ACFOA has not crusaded against Indonesia outright as Whitlam suggests.

What ~~it~~ has done is to criticise the Indonesian Government/military for their abuses of fundamental human rights in East Timor.

As political scientist Dr Nancy Viviani points out in her 1976 study Australians and the Timor Issue (Australian Outlook) opposition in the case of Timor is confined to the Indonesian Government and has not generally spilt over into anti-Indonesian hostility. She points out that the involved groups have usually drawn a distinction between the Government and the people of Indonesia and that no-one has suggested cutting off aid to Indonesia, apart from military aid. She further points out that the criticism has been motivated predominantly by concern for the rights of the Timorese people not opposition to the Suharto regime.

A number of Australian agencies fund Indonesian projects and some have affiliates working there successfully.

- b. ACFOA and some individual member agencies in particular have been anti-colonialism, whether colonialism of the Portuguese or the Indonesian variety.

Individual member agencies, including AWD, World University Service, and the Catholic Bishops, made criticisms of Portuguese colonialism in East Timor from 1968-1974. Portugal's decision to decolonise in 1974 was welcomed and agencies increasingly looked for ways to help the decolonisation process and to ensure the exercise of self-determination.

This policy was formally adopted by ACFOA for the first time at its AGM in Aug. 1975 when it called on the Whitlam Government

- i. to express its support for the principle of 'independence of choice',
- ii. to oppose external interference,
- iii. to provide facilities for a mediated solution to the conflict;
- iv. to re-establish the Australian consulate in Dili;
- v. to provide development assistance.

The Whitlam Government did not welcome these calls. None of these requests were carried out.

The important point to note about this Council is that it was held two weeks after the civil war in East Timor which Fretilin won, and the resolutions stopped short of Fretilin's policy of independence. If ACFOA was partisan and pro-Fretilin what was it doing calling for independence of choice after Fretilin had won the civil war. ACFOA's policy continues to call for genuine self-determination.

c. However, while standing for self-determination, ACFOA did work with Fretilin in October 1975 when its aid team visited the territory. Portugal had withdrawn so ACFOA could not work with it; it therefore worked with the de facto Administration of the day, Fretilin. ACFOA also worked with the Catholic Church in East Timor and with an independent non-Government ~~emergency~~ body of Timorese whose job was to liaise with the aid groups.

The International Red Cross, and ASIAT (The Australian Society for Inter-country Aid), - neither of them ACFOA members, also worked with the Fretilin administration in the same way.

It might also be pointed out that ACFOA has worked very hard on behalf of refugees from East Timor, some of them victims of the civil war, and many of them UDT, Fretilin's rival in the civil war.

3. Whitlam: "ACFOA's political posturings compelled the (Australian) Red Cross to withdraw in December, 1975". (col.2 p. 80)

The Australian Red Cross withdrew from ACFOA because it felt ACFOA's deepening concern with human rights and the causes of poverty and oppression were incompatible with Red Cross' need, as an emergency relief organisation, to be politically neutral.

The Red Cross did not condemn ACFOA taking this line, it simply said Red Cross could not be part of it. Both organisations respect each other's position.

ACFOA from 1975 repeatedly called for the International Red Cross to be admitted to East Timor. It continues to support ICRC's involvement and hopes it will be permitted to broaden the scope of its involvement.

4. Whitlam: "ACFOA tried to have the (Traill) Commissioners alter their report and then did not release it".

After waiting two and a half years for the Commission's report and granting a number of extensions, ACFOA had the courtesy to

visit the Commissioners in person, to point out some factual errors and unfortunate phrasing in their report, which the Commissioners acknowledged and incorporated.

ACFOA did not suppress the report or seek to discourage study of it. It decided not to promote it, for two reasons:

- i. because it never received an official copy signed by all three Commissioners;
- ii. because, after a good look at the report, it decided its contents were too dated to be of any use.

5. Whitlam quotes Traill with approval on two scores:

- a. "the one task for which they exist as a specialist aid grouping (is) to comfort the victims of war and disaster, to assist the destitute and to aid refugees". (col.3.p.80)

While ACFOA does precisely this in a multitude of ways (Tonga etc.), the supply of material aid is not its sole function.

Its charter also obliges it to undertake development education in Australia and development activity and the latter necessarily involves action for justice and human dignity in partnership with the poor and oppressed.

- b. "ACFOA's failure to provide much-needed aid to the East Timorese". (col.1. p. 81)

ACFOA and its member agencies have effectively supplied much needed relief aid to the East Timorese in a number of locations: East Timor itself,) and Portugal, Jakarta and Australia. At least \$500,000 humanitarian has been allocated since 1975.

It is arguable, also, that it is precisely because ACFOA has kept such a close eye on the Timor situation and pressured the Indonesian government by constantly pointing up the needs in Timor, that Jakarta has allowed in international agencies.

ACFOA is not the only agency to have been excluded from East Timor. The International Red Cross was excluded in 1975 just before the Indonesian invasion when it (ICRC) could not get a protection guarantee from Indonesia; it was excluded until 1979 despite the fact that its services were undoubtedly required well before that, and despite the fact that it never raised its voice in a critical way.

OXFAM London, which has cooperated by making funds available to CRS and has remained silent and uncritical, continues to be excluded to this point despite repeated attempts to win access.

Pat Walsh

30.3.82