

AGE 17/3/82 p. 13

# Disturbing visit to East Timor

**T**HERE is something disturbing about the visit to East Timor by Mr Whitlam and Mr Peter Hastings, foreign editor of the 'Sydney Morning Herald', and the reports that are now emerging from the visit.

Generally speaking, the visit is in character with Jakarta's practice in recent years, which has been to give access only to those journalists and politicians who have placed on record their sympathy for Indonesian actions and motives in East Timor.

Both Mr Whitlam and Mr Hastings have frequently demonstrated their sympathy for the Suharto regime's stand on East Timor, and both have urged that Australians cease their criticism of "integration". What is troubling about this mission is that three of the officials who appear to have played a major part in sponsoring and organising it, General Murtopo, General Murchani and Harry Tjan, back in 1974 and 1975 were key actors in "Operasi Komodo", the intelligence operation to subvert Timor's independence movement.

We have yet to hear from Mr Whitlam, but there is a great deal of inaccuracy in the articles by Peter Hastings, which have appeared in 'The Age' during the past few days. I am particularly concerned at some of his remarks about the Timorese Apostolic Administrator, Monsignor Martinho da Costa Lopes, who has spoken out courageously about the situation in Timor, and whose credibility the sponsors of the visit by Mr Whitlam and Mr Hastings have been seeking to undermine for some time. It has been stated that Monsignor Lopes claimed that there was famine in Timor, a claim which the Australian visitors found to be groundless.

But this is not what the administrator said. According to his brief letter, he merely stated in effect that famine could be expected unless action was taken to prevent it. The Whitlam and Hastings visit took place two-thirds of the way through the wet season when famine conditions are rarely present in Timor. At this time of the year food is normally plentiful, much of it from the natural environment. It is in six months, at the end of the long dry season, when even in normal times food shortages sometimes occur. Moreover, the places visited by Mr Hastings, which included Maliana, Suai, Lospalos and Ermera, are among the better food-producing areas.

Let me now turn to Mr Hastings's comments on the loss of life resulting from the events of the past seven years. His account

## OPEN SPACE

By JIM DUNN, president of the Human Rights Council of Australia and former consul to East Timor.

gives the impression that he is out to diminish the magnitude of the Timor tragedy. On the one hand, he casts doubt on the way the population figures were collected in the Portuguese times, while, on the other, he suggests that the recent Indonesian census figures at the end of 1980 might be more credible. In fact, the official Portuguese census was reasonably well put together, with officials, contrary to the Hastings account, collecting statistics right down to the village level.

Moreover, the church also collected its own statistics through its 50 or so posts throughout the island. From these sources it was possible to assess with reasonable accuracy that the colony's population was about 680,000 when the civil war broke out, and was growing at a rate of about 2 per cent annually. It was well established that 1500 to 2000 lives were lost in the one-month civil war. Whatever the abnormalities of the situation Timor's population would have continued to grow and would have been more than 700,000 by 1980, or about 150,000 more than the figures produced at the Indonesian census, which, according to some Timorese sources, were deliberately inflated. Therefore, this discrepancy must be attributed directly or indirectly to the humanitarian consequences of Indonesia's invasion and its aftermath.

Mr Hastings tells that 10,000 Timorese fled by boat to neighboring Indonesian islands, while another 10,000 made their way to Portugal. This is simply untrue. There were no boats for the Timorese to leave the island. Had some been available they would have attempted to get to Australia, and not sought refuge in the lands of the invader. During the past seven years only a little more than 2000 Timorese managed to get to distant Portugal. Peter Hastings is of course right to say that we will probably never know the true loss of life, but please let us not try to play down the extent to which these people have suffered.

Nor let us forget that the occasional pleas for help, such as the appeal that came from Monsignor Lopes, are not just appeals for food. We are also being asked not to abandon East Timor until something is done about the broader human rights issues.