

9 Kirra Road
Allambie Heights 2100
7 February 1982.

March?

The Editor
Sydney Morning Herald
Dear Sir,

While we all appreciate news from East Timor, your foreign editor's contribution as an eyewitness account of events in that country was clearly not a neutral statement, but part of an ongoing debate. I refer particularly to his pointed attack on the integrity of the senior Timorese catholic priest, Monsignor Lopes.

Father Lopes, who I remember as such from my work in Dili in November 1975 as relief co-ordinator for the Australian Council for Overseas Aid, was then firmly in the 'camp' of the Bishop of Dili, himself strongly critical of Fretilin. I recall we spent some time practicing Bahasa Indonesia. That he is now a harsh critic of the Indonesian presence in his country reflects the appalling condition of his countrymen during the past 6 years of Indonesian occupation. It is hardly a sign of character weakness.

In the eyes of Mr Hastings his shortcomings seem to be that:

1. He suggested last year that famine was possible in East Timor unless a relief campaign was mounted. Mr Hastings himself admits that there is "a perennial risk of severe food shortage leading to famine in the first three months of every year". And in his subsequent article he shows great apprehension concerning delaying tactics by the Indonesian government in permitting Australian food aid to go to East Timor. Mgr Lopes knows very well Indonesia's use of food as a political weapon. How was the priest "mischievous"?
2. He alleges that this ^{potential} food shortage is linked with a particular army exercise, one in which many Timorese were killed. Mr Hastings himself reports that this operation was "not only clumsy but counterproductive. It resulted in few surrenders and took thousands of able-bodied men away from the urgent needs of planting and other village duties".
3. He reported "hundreds dying daily" on Atauro Island. Mr Hastings refers also to the use of Atauro to house 3737 people from Los Palos, of whom "many hundreds did die from severe gastro-enteritis". It is not clear why this is a "very different story from that of the bishop". Does it not also reflect on conditions in "resettlement villages" such as Atauro which are as Mr Hastings tells us an army tactic to separate Fretilin from civilian support. The conditions portrayed contrast strangely with the picture presented by your reporter of village life in East Timor.
4. He had not visited the areas on which he reported. This must be seen in the light of the strong probability that such an outspoken critic of Indonesian activity in the community would never be permitted to travel freely. The armed forces presence is strongly influential in Indonesian government, but nowhere as strong as in East Timor. Mgr Lopes necessarily relies on his priests for information. Is Mr Hastings suggesting that Timorese priests do not know the local situation?

Overall I can only agree with Mr Hastings that: "Timor's priests... remain the conscience of the whole people". Why then is Mr Hastings so keen to denigrate their official, and authentically Timorese, spokesman?

5. Resp for Hudson. See ref. in 3?

Your foreign editor is at pains to portray his visit in terms of international goodwill and understanding. We learn however from an earlier Herald report that arrangements were made by the Center for Strategic Studies, the "think tank" of General Ali Murtopo's powerful Special Operations Unit, well known for its international political machinations. They are always careful in their preparations for such visits.

It would have been remiss of me not to point out, from my great respect for this gentle and courageous churchman, that we should examine carefully the way in which evidence on East Timor has been handled on this occasion, an exercise which can lead to conclusions substantially different from that suggested by your foreign editor.

Yours faithfully

R.A. Richards.

