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EDITORIAL

East Timor: development agencies at the crossroads

THE extraordinary attack launched last week by the Australian Council for Overseas Aid on the visit to East Timor by former Labor Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, raises the fundamental question of whether ACFOA is essentially concerned with development aid or in conducting political operations in Australia.

Self-appointed apologist

ACFOA is nominally the umbrella organisation of Australia's development aid agencies, but increasingly has appeared as a self-appointed apologist for Fretilin, the Marxist-oriented liberation movement in East Timor. ACFOA President, Richard Alston, last week attacked the Indonesian Government over the Whitlam visit, saying, "To confine entry only to known Indonesian apologists and not independent observers would be a blatant double standard which can only lend further credence to persistent reports of continuing widespread famine and military repression in East Timor."

The attitude taken by the Australian Council for Overseas Aid could hardly be said to make it an "independent observer" on events in East Timor — or other international questions for that matter. Apart from its prominent role in supporting Fretilin in East Timor, and attacking Indonesia in the most extravagant terms, ACFOA has condemned the Australian Government's suspension of aid to Vietnam following its invasion of Cambodia, joined the left-sponsored campaign for unilateral nuclear disarmament by the West, and backed the armed struggle of Namibian "freedom fighters" in southern Africa.

In relation to East Timor, the real facts of what is happening are known. Independent observers from the International Red Cross and (US) Catholic Relief Services have been operating in the country for a number of years. But these organisations have scrupulously refrained from becoming engaged in the politically motivated campaign waged by ACFOA, along with a number of church-based development agencies in Australia, against Indonesia.

Ultimate incompatibility

The reason is obvious. They know that participation in relief work for the innocent victims of war and other disasters is ultimately incompatible with participation in political operations. A comparison of the relative effectiveness of the two approaches bears out that judgment. ACFOA is hopelessly locked into the dry rut of political partisanship, while the real work is being done by two agencies in the field.

News Weekly's official policy is expressed in the Editorials and in Point of View on page 16.

Australian aid agencies should emulate the activities of the International Red Cross and Catholic Relief Services, who are more concerned about mercy than politics.

Austria robs itself to pay Moscow

THE recent credit deal between the Soviet Union and Australia illustrates the success the Soviets have had in getting extremely advantageous terms from Western bankers despite the NATO ministerial decision to suspend economic co-operation with Moscow.

Hollow protestation

A group of Austrian bankers, after three days of negotiations, has agreed to lend the Soviet Union some \$US\$96.6 million over the next two years at very low interest rates at a time when the Soviets are suffering an acute shortage of hard foreign currencies, and when the NATO decision — in the wake of the imposition of martial law in Poland — is still in force.

Austria is financing the purchase by the Soviets of its own exports. The loan carries a rock-bottom 7.8 per cent interest rate.

The gross irony of this situation, which Austria's claim to a neutral foreign policy does nothing to diminish, is that Austria has herself gone onto the world market to raise \$US\$150 million for six years at no less than 15.58 per cent.

Austria's aggregate trade with Eastern European countries accounts for some twenty per cent of her total foreign trade, and that trade dipped into deficit in 1980 for the first time since 1963. Her trade deficit with the USSR last year nearly doubled to near \$811.1 million because of the rising cost of Soviet oil and natural gas (such energy purchase accounting for some three-quarters of her imports from the USSR).

All of this makes Austria's protestations of "neutrality" sound very hollow indeed.