

Timor Report: Whitlam and Hastings Observed

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The former Australian Prime Minister, Mr Gough Whitlam, and the foreign editor of the Sydney Morning Herald, Mr. Peter Hastings, visited East Timor in March 1982. Their three-day visit, 1-3 March, took them to nine centres. The visit, made at the invitation of the Indonesian Government, was organized by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Jakarta and conducted in the company of the International Red Cross representative in Jakarta, Mr. Cedric Neukomm.

The following appraisal is based on Mr Hastings' own reports as they appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald and Melbourne Age (6.3.82-9.3.82), on Mr Whitlam's own accounts as found in the Bulletin (30.3.82) and broadcast on the 3LO Frontline Programme (26.3.82) and on Indonesian reports of Mr. Whitlam's Jakarta press conference (Sinar Harapan, Kompas 6.3.82).

By inviting Messrs. Whitlam and Hastings to make their recent visit to East Timor, the Indonesian Government hoped to kill (or at least neutralize) two birds with the one stone.

On the external front, I submit, the visit was designed to cripple the Inquiry into East Timor currently being conducted by the Australian Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence. As a potential threat to its campaign for the international acceptance of integration, the Inquiry is extremely worrying to Jakarta.¹

The tactic is not new. The batik curtain drawn over East Timor has been parted momentarily for selected sympathetic journalists, embassy officials and academics on a number of analogous occasions such as the eve of UN or US Congressional hearings. Faced with significant discrepancies in the evidence before it, the Inquiring Committee, not itself permitted to visit the territory, will have little choice, Jakarta hopes, but to hand down a divided or weak consensus report devoid of real impact.

More insidiously, however, the visit had also served as the basis for a sustained and calculated attack on the integrity of the head of the Catholic Church in East Timor, Monsignor da Costa Lopes. Mr. Whitlam has been particularly vicious, vilifying the Monsignor in the press and on Radio Australia as 'mischievous', 'mendacious', 'a liar', a 'malcontent', the perpetrator of a 'wicked act', and the author of a 'false' and 'cruel' letter. Mr. Hastings gratuitously blames him for the refusal of the Indonesian Government to accept badly needed food aid from Australia, offering no evidence for this accusation and ignoring the fact that Indonesian Government officials had already stated that the reason for the knock back was a shortage of storage facilities in East Timor.

Monsignor Lopes, a native Timorese about 60 years old, took charge of the Dili diocese in 1977 when his Bishop prematurely retired to Portugal, a broken man. He will serve as stand-in administrator until a new Bishop, either himself or someone else, is appointed. His time in office has been marked, *inter alia*, by isolation, military conflict, outside manipulation, internal division, and a famine (1978-80) said by International Red Cross to have been as bad as that in Biafra. In addition to pastoral duties which have increased dramatically because of the conflict and the rise in the number of Catholics, his understaffed and burdened diocese has had to provide relief and welfare services on an unprecedented scale to the masses of people who have turned to it for succour and protection. Each of the 22 priests, for example, has orphans to care for, for some 300, for others 1500. Handicapped by a tradition given more to pious devotions than progressive social action, the diocese has nevertheless, according to individual Timorese, Indonesian Church officials and foreign aid officials², responded effectively to the new challenges thrust upon it.

1 When it was learnt that Mr Whitlam was to visit East Timor, Indonesian Embassy officials in Canberra confessed their extreme sensitivity about the forthcoming Senate Inquiry (*Australian*, 4.3.82, *Northern Territory News*, 4.3.82).

2 The International Red Cross has twice (in 1980 and again in March 1982) privately advised Australian aid agencies to use the East Timor Church as their aid channel.

For his part the Monsignor is respected by his people and widely regarded as a strong character who considers it his duty to speak out when the occasion demands. In 1975 he was a critic of Fretilin. That he is now critical of Indonesia is more a reflection of the suffering his countrymen have endured for the last six years under Indonesian control than evidence of ideological bias let alone character weakness. He cooperates with the Indonesian Church in a number of ways, though he does not favour ecclesiastical integration. In this he is completely consistent with the position of his superiors in the Vatican who do not recognize Indonesia's incorporation of East Timor.

Three charges have been levelled at the Monsignor.

First, he is attacked because he stated late last year that famine would occur in East Timor unless a relief campaign was mounted. He did not say, however, there was a famine in East Timor. 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".³ And in his subsequent article he displays great apprehension over the refusal of the Indonesian Government to permit Australian food aid to go to East Timor. The Monsignor blamed the food situation on disruptions caused by Indonesian military operations in the middle of 1981. 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".⁴ He also reports the Red Cross as warning that rice planted around Laga might have been planted too late as the dry starts soon.⁵

Mr. Whitlam concedes nothing. Generalizing from his three-day visit to nine places he flatly denies the existence of actual or imminent famine. By contrast, International Red Cross officials who toured parts of East Timor just prior to Mr. Whitlam made no attack on the Monsignor and declared that their statement denying the existence of famine was valid only for the particular places visited and only for the time of their visit and in no way implied a statement about the future or the whole of East Timor.⁶

The neutrality and low-profile of the International Red Cross renders it vulnerable to exploitation. Mr. Whitlam has been quick

³ *Age*, 6.3.82.

⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6.3.82.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Report of a telephone conversation with David Delapraz, head of the ICRC mission to East Timor as reported to John Waddingham, Jakarta, 6.3.82.

to make liberal use of the ICRC as his authority regardless of the highly qualified character of its assessment. Were the ICRC to respond publically to Mr. Whitlam's loose generalizations, it would lay itself open to the charge of politics by the Indonesian Government upon whose good will it depends for the continuation of its East Timor programme.

It should also be pointed out that the local Church, far from being mischievous, is an autonomous entity with its own responsibilities and services and an assessment based on daily contact with the people in every part of Timor. Like the ICRC which also recently appealed for emergency funds, the Church and its leader have a duty to meet the needs they see. International Church agencies have supported it for several years on this basis and, in the words of Australian Catholic Relief, "will continue (to provide financial assistance) as long as the local Church requests this assistance".⁷ An assessment of the food situation in East Timor compiled by the local Church in February 1982 confirms that this assistance is still needed. It concluded that 75% of East Timor and some 200,000 people will continue to be vulnerable to food shortages, malnutrition and occasional famine resulting from a combination of factors such as rat plagues, climatic conditions, poor morale, the weakened condition of workers and structural problems created by the resettlement centres and the administrative policies of the Indonesian Government/military.

A second charge levelled at the Monsignor is that he falsified or exaggerated the number of civilians killed at Lacluta during Indonesian military operations last year.

Mr. Whitlam alone has made this charge. But having made it at his Jakarta press conference⁸, he has not repeated it in any of his strong attacks on the Monsignor since his return to Australia.

In Jakarta Mr. Whitlam also called into question the Monsignor's credibility because he did not specify the source of his information.⁹ This is quite unfair. To name sources would destroy trust and risk probable harassment of the informers from the military.

One unverified account of the Lacluta incident in circulation is that an Indonesian army unit killed everyone in the village believing they were Fretilin soldiers. Only when the huts were investigated the following morning was it discovered the dead were not

⁷ *The Advocate*, 'ACR slams critics of Timor prelate', 18.3.82.

⁸ *Age*, 6.3.82.

⁹ *Kompas*, 6.3.82.

Fretilin soldiers but civilians, including women and children. The Monsignor heard of the massacre when Timorese soldiers in the unit told him of their crime.

The third charge directed at the Monsignor, and indeed at the whole Church in East Timor, is that Church people alone are critical of Indonesia. Mr. Whitlam alone makes this allegation. At his Jakarta press conference, he claimed that all the negative information about East Timor can always be traced to Timorese Church officials.¹⁰ In his *ABC Frontline* interview he made the same accusation but singled out the Monsignor in particular. Answering a question about reports of atrocities, corruption and exploitation in East Timor, he replied emphatically: "The only source, for those allegations . . . is this letter from the Monsignor in Dili".¹¹

This is patent nonsense. The Church's criticisms are shared by other sections of Timorese society. Mr. Hastings is closer to the mark when he asserts that "the Indonesian Government will need to listen to the Church . . . Timor's priests . . . remain the conscience of a whole people".¹²

Negative information about the Indonesian administration of East Timor also emanates with equal regularity and consistency from refugees (whose very departure from East Timor at huge expense is itself a criticism), letters, and senior administration officials. Mr. Hastings, writing about a memo directed to President Suharto in June 1981 which detailed corruption, oppression, and exploitation in East Timor, states that some, maybe all, its contents are true.¹³

Having quite unjustifiably isolated the Church as the only "malcontent" in East Timor, Mr. Whitlam proceeds to explain away its criticism of Indonesia. Adopting a specious argument put by CSIS strategists to foreign visitors on previous occasions, he warns against taking too much notice of the Church because it is prejudiced. "He (the Monsignor) and . . . at least half the clergy . . . are nostalgic; they miss the Portuguese . . . 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".¹⁴ The source of its criticism, Mr. Whitlam would have us believe, is not any objective social situation created by the Indonesian military

10 *Ibid.*

11 *ABC Frontline*, 26.3.82.

12 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6.3.82.

13 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12.3.82.

14 *ABC Frontline*, 26.3.82.

but the Church's sense of frustration and alienation. Is it really necessary to go to this length to cover up for the Indonesian military?

Why is Mr. Whitlam so keen to denigrate the Church in East Timor and its official, authentically Timorese voice, Monsignor Lopes?

There are, I submit, two principal reasons.

First it is to be expected that the Indonesian Government and its apologists would be concerned by adverse reports coming from an authoritative body such as the Catholic Church and would try to offset these criticisms. An earlier tactic was to dismiss reports about East Timor attributed to Church sources as being "particularly suspect", the implication being that they were fabricated. Now that the authenticity of these reports is beyond challenge, the protagonists have little choice but to seek to destroy the credibility of the reports by making a direct attack on the integrity of the Church and its leadership.

The second reason for the attack is more insidious. It relates to the popular support given to the Church in East Timor by the people and the Church's attitude to integration.

According to the respected Indonesian weekly, *Tempo*¹⁵, the 1980 Government census of East Timor showed that out of a population of 555,350 inhabitants, almost 450,000 or two-thirds, are Catholic, whereas Church files show a percentage of one-third only. *Tempo* observed that apparently many East Timorese when asked for their religion confessed themselves Catholic. It would appear that the Church has become a focus for nationalist sentiment, a situation analogous to that in Poland.

Officially the Church is neutral towards integration. Its role is pastoral and humanitarian. Jakarta, however, is frustrated by this neutrality because it means in practice that the principal non-government organization in what it regards as its 27th Province is withholding recognition of the incorporation. To win the Church's imprimatur would give Jakarta both enormous leverage over the local people and contribute significantly to its campaign for international acceptance of integration. It is not surprising then that in recent months it has stepped up its pressure on both the Timorese Church and on the Catholic hierarchy in Jakarta and Rome to accept integration.¹⁶ Mr. Whitlam's attacks must be seen in this context.

15 22 August, 1981.

At the centre of this power-play is Monsignor Lopes. His portrayal as a politically-motivated, irresponsible, trouble-maker, is mischievous and calculated to pressurize the Vatican into taking disciplinary action which, it is hoped, will at least dry up the damaging leaks coming from Church sources in East Timor. Certainly any thoughts the Vatican may have had about promoting the Monsignor to the rank of Bishop of Dili have been virtually sabotaged. His depiction of the Monsignor as a "turbulent priest", a Timorese Thomas à Becket leaves one in no doubt that Mr. Hastings believes he should be got rid of. He is perhaps overly wishful, however, when he claims that "it would not surprise many in Jakarta if at the end of this year the Apostolic Administrator is recalled and replaced by an Indonesian Bishop".¹⁷

While Mr. Whitlam devotes the bulk of his reports to attacking the critics of Indonesia's role in East Timor, and the Church in particular, Mr. Hastings offers more by way of factual information. It is specifically to his reports that I will now turn.

They are marred by a number of factual errors, some of which should be pointed out.

Mr. Hastings' last visit to East Timor was made in 1980, not in September 1978 as stated. The International Red Cross representative, Mr Cedric Neukomm, has been based in Jakarta, not Dili. It is not accurate to state that Monsignor Lopes "holds his appointment from Rome because the Vatican does not recognize Indonesia's incorporation of the province".¹⁸ All diocesan leaders are appointed from Rome irrespective of the status of their country. It is not accurate to state that in Portuguese times radio broadcasts were in Portuguese only. From at least 1974 they were also in Tetum and Chinese. The *pagar betis* or human fence tactic used last year by the Indonesian army against Fretilin involves encirclement by a chain of people on foot, not by resettlement villages. A casual flip through an Indonesian dictionary will demonstrate it is not true to claim that there are very few English words which can be Indonesianized. Furthermore it is not surprising that Mr. Whitlam failed to amuse Indonesian ministers with his wit by creating a whole new lexicon of such transpositions. Each of the four examples given by Mr. Hastings, or at least variations of them, can be found in any standard Indonesian dictionary.

16 See 'Why Church may hold key to Timor's future', *Outlook*, Jan. 1982, by Patrick Walsh.

17 *Age*, 8.3.82.

18 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6.3.82.

Of greater concern, however, is Mr. Hastings' penchant for the half-truth. His accounts are characterized by a number of significant omissions which have the effect of misleading the reader into a more sympathetic view of the situation than the facts warrant.

- * The Government's hands-off attitude towards the Catholic Church in East Timor is inspired, he explains, by an attitude of religious tolerance and reluctance to offend the Vatican. He omits to mention the principal factor at work, namely the Government's desire to woo the influential Church into giving its blessing to integration.
- * Mr. Hastings speaks positively of the "mushrooming growth" of resettlement centres, rather blandly explaining that the new houses in them "belong mainly to people who have only relatively recently been brought down (from the hills) and resettled". No mention is made, however, of the radical restructuring of Timorese life these centres represent, of the poor morale of their inhabitants, of the military strategy which is their *raison d'être*, of the curtailment of freedoms they entail, of the fact that the people were forced out of the mountains by war-induced hunger and that countless thousands died as a result of that strategy — the "hundreds of deaths" on Atauro he alludes to being only the latest of many.
- * The resettlement villages, schools, and road-building may well be materially impressive. But Mr. Hastings omits to mention that all three play a vital role in the Indonesianization of the people and in control of the countryside. The Government has made a priority of the schools as instruments of political acculturation. As the US academic, Donald Weatherbee, who visited East Timor in 1980, observed recently: "Their (top Indonesian officials) basic commitment is to the next generation rather than the present".¹⁹ Work done on sealing the Dili-Ermera road is pointed to by Mr. Hastings as an example of development. He omits to mention, however, that insofar as the road leads to the heart of highly prized coffee plantations whose produce is tightly controlled by the army monopoly P. T. Denok, it will contribute but marginally to Timorese development.
- * The reader is given the impression that families were moved from the eastern end of the island to Atauro to protect them from the depredations of Fretilin. Could it be they were really moved because they were voluntarily assisting the guerilla resistance and frustrating the army's efforts to pacify the area?

¹⁹ *Western Australian*, 2.2.82.

- * The reader is further given the impression that there are only a handful of political prisoners in East Timor: six "in Dili jail", thirteen "in the Comarca". Is this all there are?
- * It may be difficult to establish precisely how many have died in East Timor, but the potentially embarrassing nature of this question for the Indonesian Government cannot be evaded by the facile blanket claim "we shall never know".²⁰ There is, I submit, sufficient data to justify a productive investigation of this question. Mr. Hastings' agnosticism is based on his premise that good records were not kept until later in the Indonesian takeover period. There are Portuguese, Church, aid agency, and governmental records of population figures and movements during 1975. A proper scientifically conducted study of the question is long overdue. Who is correct: Mr. Whitlam who claims 40,000 refugees fled to West Timor in 1975²¹, or Mr. Hastings who claims it was about 20,000?²² Further, what is the source for the latter's claim that 10,000 fled "to islands near Indonesian Timor" at this time, a claim that has never before been made.
- * Mr. Rodney Lewis, Secretary-General of the International Commission of Jurists in Australia, observed recently that self-determination remains the basic issue for East Timor.²³ The most glaring omission in Mr. Hastings' accounts is that nothing is said about general East Timorese attitudes to Indonesia, a matter of obvious importance. By speaking of resistance only in terms of a small group of hard-core Fretilin (who, according to Jakarta have numbered about 200 for the past four years!) the impression is conveyed, however, that everyone else is happy. Are we really to believe that Fretilin alone are hostile to integration? And is it not conceivable that Fretilin are driven by a love of freedom and country, and not only fear as Mr. Hastings states?

While news from East Timor is appreciated, the contributions from Mr. Whitlam and Mr. Hastings as eyewitness accounts of events in that country are clearly not neutral statements but part of an ongoing debate. As such they have failed to allay widespread concern in Australia about the situation there.

The credibility of the exercise was in doubt from the outset. If the Indonesian Government is confident of its claims about East

20 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8.3. 82.

21 *ABC Frontline*, 26 March, 1982.

22 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8.3.82.

23 Letter to *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16.3.82.

Timor and genuinely concerned to settle the issue it must allow independent observers and critics of its role in East Timor to go there. Messrs. Whitlam and Hastings do not fit either category. Like it or not, the fact is both are perceived in Australia as apologists for the Suharto regime and one in particular, Mr. Whitlam, as an indefatigable advocate of East Timor's integration with Indonesia. The involvement of the Jakarta-based CSIS in the organisation of the tour only served to further compound their credibility problem as the principals of CSIS were heavily involved in the Indonesian plans to take over East Timor from 1974 on.

The Indonesian Government cannot honestly have expected an already sceptical Australian public to have been favourably disposed to accept the findings of an investigation conducted by these men in this way. And close analysis of their reports shows that *a priori* scepticism was well founded. Their visit has served to refuel the debate, not to advance our knowledge.

28.3.82