

Gough Whitlam: Reported famine in East Timor completely false

JAKARTA, — Australian former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam just back from a four-day tour of East Timor said here Friday reports about famine in the 27th province of Indonesia were completely false.

After visiting many places in East Timor, he had not seen the least sign of famine or of impending famine, he said.

In a press conference here today, Gough Whitlam further advised that his findings could be checked for their truth with the mission of the International Committee of Red Cross Societies (ICRC) and the United States Catholic Relief Agency operating in East Timor.

The ICRC mission had in an earlier statement here on Thursday issued the same conclusions.

Whitlam said the reports about the alleged famine had made the rounds in Australia as the result of a letter from the administrator of the East Timor bishopric Msgr Martinho Dacosta Lopes, who asked for a US\$ 300,000 aid for emergency food and medical supplies to cope with an alleged impending famine.

The letter also made mention of victims among the civilian population during security operations in East Timor.

Drought.

Gough Whitlam in this connection pointed to the bishopric in Dili as the originator of the false reports.

He further said he also had occasion, while in Dili to talk with Dacosta Lopes, at which meeting Dacosta Lopes said he was now certain that a 1000 ton food reserve planned by the ICRC for the region would be sufficient to face possible food shortage in several places because of drought.

The former Prime Minister also expressed his view that East Timor is no longer in danger, as evident from the fact, he said, that the Red Cross helicopter he was using did not hesitate to fly low over various parts of East Timor.

He said he had been informed that the strength of the Fretilin insurgents now remained at about 100 to 130 with their hide-outs in the jungles.

Speaking about the health of the local community, he said the matter was truly in the good care of the Indonesian government and Red Cross. He said there appeared to

be sufficient medical supplies.

Conceding that there is endemic malaria in the region, he said this disease is a world-wide problem which still eluded eradication.

While in East Timor, Whitlam had occasion to visit a number of development projects, including agricultural and fishery centres.

He saw a lot of school buildings government offices and public health centres.

"From the air I could see hundreds of cows from Australia," he added.

Whitlam visited a penitentiary in Dili. Most of the inmates are people convicted criminals.

One thing which, according to Whitlam, is surprising is the maintenance of a culture inherited by the former Portuguese colonial government.

For a nation with the biggest Moslem population in the world, it is tolerant indeed.

"Even names of streets (in Portuguese) are not changed", he added.

Gough Whitlam visited East Timor from Monday to Thursday in the company of Peter Hastings, a seasoned journalist, and Prof. J. Macky.

I.C.R.C.: No Signs of famine.

The International Red Cross Committee (ICRC) mission did not see any signs of famine in East Timor, but there is still anxiety that food shortage will occur in several places in the next three or four months due to unfavourable weather conditions.

Dr. A. Willi, the ICRC medical delegate who had served for one year in East Timor, even stated at a press conference here Thursday afternoon that the food situation in several places was very satisfactory thanks to a well functioning irrigation system during the whole year.

On the possibility of food shortage at several places, D. Delapraz, the ICRC regional delegate from Kuala Lumpur, said that such a situation prevailed not only in East Timor, but also in bordering East Nusa Tenggara.

Such a probability might be caused by unfavourable weather conditions, like a little rainfall, frequent whirlwinds and rat plague, he added.

ICRC was therefore of the opinion that it was not longer

necessary to introduce an emergency program for the distribution of food similar to that of two and a half years ago, Delapraz said. "What is necessary at present is to create a bufferstock to face eventual shortage of food in some areas. Apart from that it is also necessary to consolidate efforts in the field of general health", he added.

The ICRC mission which consists of D. Delapraz (Kuala Lumpur), C. Neukom (Jakarta), Dr. A. Willi (Geneva) and Mis R. Tissieres (Geneva), during 11 days from February 15 through 26, made a tour of Atauro Island, Dilli, Los Palos, Baucau and 14 villages.

Surprise.

At Dilli, Delapraz said, the mission met a "surprise" situation, when visiting "Comarca prison". Originally they thought they would see military prisoners in big numbers, but in reality they only numbered 13. Most of the prisoners were ordinary convicts (71) and the remainder were public prosecutor's detainees (11) awaiting trial.

At Atauro Island, inhabited by 1,579 indigenous people and some 3,737 people from other regions in Indonesia, the ICRC team did not hear any complaints that members of their families or friends were still detained, except those in the Dilli prison, Delapraz said.

The ICRC is at present trying to find the permanent addresses of the inhabitants to assist their separated families in Australia, Portugal and other places in order to enable them to correspond.

The ICRC last December assisted in the repatriation of some 1976 foreigners from East Timor to Switzerland, Senegal and Cabo Verde.

In particular for Atauro Island the team was of the view that it was necessary that the government continued food contribution here due to lack of land for cultivation.

The team further had to admit that in carrying out the humanitarian operation many difficulties had to be encountered due to the difficult terrain.

The ICRC team further disclosed that in their humanitarian tasks they had received full cooperation of the Palang Merah Indonesia (Indonesian Red Cross) and the government. (Antara)