

ACFOA
Canberra.

The President,
The International Committee of the Red Cross,
17, Avenue de la Paix,
CH - 1211, Geneve,
Switzerland.

Dear Sir,

I am writing as Director of the Australian Council for Overseas Aid on the question of East Timor.

As you will know, ACFOA is the coordinating body for some 55 Australian non-Government organisations working in the field of overseas aid and development. You will also know of ACFOA's long-standing interest in East Timor and our support for the involvement of ICRC there. Since the resumption of its program in 1979, ICRC has undoubtedly saved many lives and rehabilitated the health of countless thousands of East Timorese. We were therefore pleased to learn from recent press reports that ICRC will not only stay on in East Timor for a further period but will extend its program to include the island of Atauro.

I am writing now to draw your attention to certain areas of confusion in Australia regarding the situation in East Timor and ICRC's role there, and to ask if you would kindly agree to clarify some matters for us.

The background to this request lies in the recent visit to East Timor by the former Australian Prime Minister, Mr Gough Whitlam, and Mr Peter Hastings of the Sydney Morning Herald.

As is clear from the enclosed media reports, Mr Whitlam in particular has sought to associate his visit closely with the ICRC. On Radio Australia he stated his visit was made "entirely under the auspices of the ICRC". In his letter to the Bulletin of April 20 he says: "the itinerary was arranged by the ICRC, I flew in ICRC helicopters and I was accompanied throughout by the ICRC delegate". He has also sought ^{to identify} his highly partial assessment of the Timor situation with that of the ICRC stating in his Bulletin letter of April 20: "I relied in my Bulletin article on the published ICRC quarterly reports, a personal briefing by the ICRC team on February 28, a widely reported ICRC press conference on March 4 and a CRS document of February 1". For his part, Mr Hastings has claimed no more than that the visit was made at the invitation of the Indonesian Government, was organised by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta, and was undertaken in the company of the ICRC representative in Jakarta, Mr Cedric Neukomm, using an ICRC helicopter. This would seem to be a more accurate account of the sponsorship of the visit.

Mr Whitlam's assessment of the situation would seem to boil down to four propositions:

1. The Head of the Catholic Church in East Timor, Mgr Lopes da Costa, is a liar, motivated by anti-Indonesian sentiment;

2. there is no famine, either actual or imminent, in East Timor;
3. there were no, or only few, killings of civilians at Lacluta last year;
4. the situation in Timor is better than it was under Portugal before 1975; development is clearly visible.

This assessment, and Mr Whitlam's efforts to associate it with ICRC, have concerned and confused many people here.

First, many Australians find it hard to believe that the situation could be better than it was under Portugal when it is known that Timor has been through an invasion and a famine, both of horrifying proportions, since 1975. This is not to play down the excellent work of the ICRC. It is simply to state that, whatever the inadequacies of the Portuguese, we find it difficult to believe that in view of the recent past and on-going reports about the current situation, the situation in Timor today would be happier and more wholesome than it was before 1975. Many have also been shocked to hear the Apostolic Administrator, Mgr Lopes, described in such strong terms. Those who try to follow the situation have been particularly moved because they respect the man, know what he and the Church have been through and believe that he is motivated by genuine concern. Mr Whitlam visited Atauro in March and did not exclude it from his general 'no famine' assessment. But in April we learn through the press that the ICRC is to commence a feeding program there. This does not mean of course that there was a famine as such when Mr Whitlam and Mr Neukomm made their visit, but it does suggest that things must have been quite abnormal - a fact which Mr Whitlam's generalised assessment makes no allowance for. With regard to the broader situation, many have found Mr Whitlam's statement that there is no famine unsatisfying. This may well have been literally true of the places he visited but it has not allayed fears. The very fact that ICRC continues to operate in East Timor, as distinct from West Timor, e.g., suggests to the average person that things are not normal and ICRC calls for extra food from the outside tend to confirm this perception.

Finally I hope you will not think it presumptuous of me if I point out that many of us have been frankly surprised that ICRC should have involved itself to the degree it did with the Whitlam visit to East Timor. ICRC is of course widely known and respected in Australia and is seen as a humanitarian organisation which is scrupulously jealous of its political neutrality. Most would agree, I think, that it is proper and responsible for ICRC to make its assessment of the Timor situation, within the parameters of its mandate, available to certain enquirers. Therefore no-one would question the propriety of the ICRC team briefing Mr Whitlam in Bali or making ICRC situation reports available. But to actually facilitate the visit and accompany Mr Whitlam and Mr Hastings has honestly surprised many in view of the well-known activities of Mr Whitlam in particular and the close involvement of the Indonesian Government and CSIS in the management of the trip, the latter organisation being of questionable reputation both in Jakarta and abroad. Nothing in Mr Whitlam's statements

since his visit has allayed the general belief that his mission was principally political in nature. As is evident from the enclosures he has had little to say about the actual situation in East Timor preferring instead to use the media space and time provided for attacks on the critics of Indonesia's behaviour in Timor.

In the context of the last paragraph I should note that ICRC representatives declined to meet with two Australian aid agency representatives who contacted them in Jakarta on March 6. The chairman of the ACFOA East Timor sub-Committee, Mr Bill Armstrong, also phoned Mr Neukomm while visiting Jakarta recently only to be told that, on instruction from his superiors, a meeting was not permissible.

Could ICRC provide answers to the following questions:

1. Does ICRC have complete access to all parts of East Timor? Has it actually visited all parts of East Timor in recent times?
2. What is the nature of ICRC's current relationship with the Indonesian Red Cross in East Timor?
3. What is ICRC's assessment of the overall food situation now and into the foreseeable future?
4. What is ICRC's assessment of the overall medical situation now and in the foreseeable future?
5. How much longer will ICRC remain in East Timor?
6. Is it correct that UNICEF and possibly World Food Program will take over from ICRC in June this year?
7. What is the prison situation in East Timor? Does ICRC have access to prisoners?
8. Is ICRC providing a tracing service and, if so, how does it work?
9. Is ICRC involved in family reunions? If so, what is the scope of this involvement?
10. What is the cost of ICRC's present Timor program and who is assisting financially?
11. Were there any killings of civilians in Lacluta or the district of Lacluta, or in other parts of East Timor last year?
12. Re Atauro:
 - i. What is its total current population?
 - ii. Are there prisoners/detainees on Atauro? If so, how many? Why are they there? What are their conditions? What assistance is ICRC able to offer these people?

How long have these people been on Atauro? and how long will they stay there?

- iii. Are there 'displaced persons' on Atauro, ie. people resettled there from the main island?

If so, why are they there? What are their conditions? What assistance is ICRC able to offer them? Are these people there voluntarily? How long have they been there? For how long will they remain there? How many have died there and from what causes? What plans, if any, are there for the return of these people to their own villages?

13. Are other off-shore islands being used by the Indonesian authorities as prisons or resettlement sites? Are the island of Alor, Jaco, Liran, or Kisar in particular being used for one or other of these purposes?
14. Resettlement sites:
Are these to be permanent fixtures? Are their residents allowed travel outside them freely? Are their residents allowed access to land in the vicinity of the centres or allowed return to their land if they so desire? How many resettlement centres are there in existence currently?
15. Has the 1000 tonnes of corn/food from Australia arrived in East Timor yet?
16. Could you explain how the buffer stock system works: e.g. are they only for the places in which they are located (how many and where are these), or for general distribution etc?
17. There are continuing reports from some Timorese refugees of the misdirection of food aid. Is there a case for ICRC more closely monitoring this aspect?

We appreciate the difficulties facing the ICRC in East Timor and, I repeat, we are genuinely thankful that ICRC has been able to work there in the face of great need. We also thought it important, however, to communicate to you honestly our questions and the confusion that has arisen because of recent events. We sincerely hope you will understand the spirit in which this letter has been written.

With every best wish,

Yours sincerely,

Bob Whan

Executive Director, ACFOA