

Feeding the flames

Jakarta outmanoeuvres its critics on East Timor, but observers worry that this may discourage relief work

By Susumu Awanohara

Jakarta: In a skilful public relations exercise, the Indonesians seem to have discredited controversial reports hotly debated in Australia that people in East Timor will face famine later this year. Two press conferences, one given by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on March 4 and the other the following day by former Australian prime minister Gough Whitlam, attacking the predictions of a famine as exaggerations, helped to defuse the criticism.

However, some observers are concerned that food shortages may develop and that Indonesia's angry reaction to international criticism of its East Timor policy may hinder relief activities. There is also the feeling that, famine or no famine, Indonesia still faces the difficult problem of truly integrating the former Portuguese territory.

The most recent episode involving East Timor — "a running ulcer in Australian-Indonesian relations," as one Australian newspaper put it recently — centred on a letter from the leader of the Roman Catholic Church in East Timor to the Australian Catholic Relief (ACR) organisation. In his letter of last November, Msgr Martinho da Costa Lopes spoke of the danger of famine and alleged that Timorese, including children and pregnant women, were killed by Indonesian forces in military operations during last July-September. The ACR issued a press statement, based on Lopes' letter, in early January calling for aid of A\$250,000 (US\$269,000) to provide basic food and medicine.

The press statement blamed the Indonesian military operations, which it said were designed to flush the remaining leftist Fretilin forces from their mountain strongholds. "All able-bodied males aged 15-50 were forced to participate in the [military] exercise, forming a human fence which moved through Fretilin-controlled areas, ensuring that the resistance members and their families would keep on the move," the statement said. It was claimed that the exercise resulted in many deaths and, in one incident alone, more than 500 Timorese were killed in a siege lasting four days. A heated debate followed in the Australian press, with the familiar condemnation of Indonesia.

An editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* called for an examination of the accuracy and motives of Lopes' letter. "[Lopes] is a Vatican appointment to Dili," the editorial said. "The Vatican does not recognise Indonesia's incorporation of East Timor. [He] is, moreover, a Portuguese cleric of pronounced anti-Indonesian views who is badly offside with the Indonesian Catholic hierarchy, including the cardinal." The editorial also pointed out that the Indonesians were categorically denying Lopes' statements about the

looming famine — "something which cannot be lightly dismissed."

In mid-February, several ICRC officials were allowed to visit East Timor. The ICRC had been active in relief work on the island in 1979-81 but this was the first time it was allowed to meet prisoners and displaced persons. At a press conference after their visit, the ICRC officials gave the figures for prisoners and displaced persons they had recorded — 95 and 3,737, respectively, most of them resulting from last year's military operations — but they refused to give other details or opinions about their condition. One question which inevitably came up was that of famine and the officials stated unequivocally

that there was no sign of it, though they said shortages due to drought and rats were likely in some parts.

Whitlam visited East Timor and later gave a press conference. He lashed out at Lopes, saying that the cleric had "perpetrated a wicked act" by his misinformation. As Whitlam summed up his observations, there was no problem of famine in East Timor and steps had been taken by the Australian and Indonesian governments as well as international agencies to make sure that there would be none.

He also felt that problems of health and security were under control, and called Lopes' allegation that 500 people were killed in one operation "absurd and irresponsible." Whitlam maintained that most of the negative stories about East Timor had come from Portuguese-trained Catholic priests because they were experiencing an identity crisis in the post-colonial situation in which their Portuguese heritage was losing relevance.

Whitlam's spirited defence of Jakarta's position on East Timor — which was how many saw his press conference performance — gave rise to speculation about

From prisoners to pariahs

Released political detainees still face discrimination despite the government's promises to the contrary

By A Correspondent

Jakarta: Despite its official all-is-forgiven policy towards *tapols* (political prisoners) arrested after the 1965 coup attempt in Indonesia, government intimidation continues. Yusuf Ishak, publisher and a former *tapol*, was quietly released on January 23 after nearly four months' detention without being charged. No mention of his arrest or release appeared in the Indonesian media, nor did the authorities make any public statement. Yusuf's arrest was an indication of the lengths to which the government will go to keep the *ex-tapols* silent.

Yusuf is a former secretary-general of the Afro-Asian Journalists' Association and was an editor of the centrist newspaper *Merdeka* until his first arrest in 1968. He was released in 1975. On October 4 last year Yusuf was arrested again after attending a controversial lecture by dissident author Pramoedya Ananta Toer at the University of Indonesia.

Although Yusuf had no part in organising the lecture he is linked with Pramoedya in a business venture. He is one of the co-directors of Hasta Mitra, a publishing firm which produced two novels written by Pramoedya during his 14-year detention without trial on Buru Island, which ended with his release in December 1979.

Both novels — *This Earth of Mankind* and *A Child of All Nations* — were subsequently banned by the Attorney-General's Department last May after circulating freely for months. *This Earth of Mankind* was a best-seller, praised even by Vice-President Adam Malik on its initial release. Regarded as one of Indonesia's greatest living novelists, Pramoedya has a wide following abroad. The Dutch edi-

tions of his latest novels sold out within weeks last year and English translations are due this year.

Despite this international success, Yusuf's arrest may have serious consequences for the fledgling publishing house. Established as a self-help venture by *ex-tapols*, Hasta Mitra lacks substantial capital backing. Reliable sources claim that Yusuf's interrogation focused almost entirely on Pramoedya and Hasta Mitra, with only passing reference to Yusuf personally. In the weeks following his lecture, Pramoedya and the other co-director of Hasta Mitra, Hasyim Rachman, were interrogated but not detained (REVIEW, Oct. 16, '81). The four student organisers of the Pramoedya lecture were held for a fortnight and later expelled by the university.

But the real link between Yusuf's detention and Pramoedya's lecture seems tenuous. His arrest was clearly an attempt to silence Pramoedya, possibly the best known of the former *tapols*, by intimidating his friends and business colleagues. Arresting Pramoedya himself would have aroused far greater international protest. But the government would be keen to quash the publication of the two remaining manuscripts yet to appear to complete the four-part historical series of novels.

The conditions of Yusuf's release are still not clear. He was permitted to return home by the Jakarta Security Command. However, he was not given the customary letter of release legally granting him freedom and is obliged to report three times a week.

While Yusuf's arrest is one of the most blatant examples, the government's intimidation of the *ex-tapols* takes various