

Timor toll may never be known

HOW many people died in East Timor's civil war and in the early stages of Indonesia's armed intervention? How many have died from famine and famine-related disease?

Ask that question of any person of authority in East Timor — doctors, teachers, priests, Indonesian and Timorese administration officials as well as army officers — and mostly you get a guarded answer, sometimes none at all.

It is a taboo subject for obvious political reasons, but in part draws from the fact that there is no way of establishing the truth. One is left with reasonable guesses.

Critics of Indonesia have made great play of the discrepancy between the 1970 Portuguese census figures of approximately 650,000 and the 1980 Indonesian census figure, published last year, of approximately 550,000.

In the first place, the two metropolitan powers obtained their census figures by different meth-

From PETER HASTINGS in Jakarta

ods in very different circumstances.

According to a Portuguese Timorese administration officer involved in the 1970 census, population figures in Portuguese times were obtained by registration of populations in major centres. Village heads were called in and asked to state the number of people living in their villages. As they were paid for their trouble, the figures they gave were questionable.

In respect of remote villages it was relatively easy to overstate or understate numbers, for the Portuguese were not likely to challenge them. By contrast, the Indonesian census was, in the words of the chief secretary of Dili, a "door-to-door operation".

Nevertheless, assuming that the Portuguese estimate was even reasonably accurate — and Red Cross sources dispute that it is because of the census method — the discrepancy in figures needs elaboration.

At least 20,000 East Timorese

fled across the border to Atambua and other areas. Many stayed in West Timor. About 10,000 went to Portugal and another 10,000 fled to islands near Indonesian Timor.

A doctor told me that it was possible to account for another 20,000 to 50,000 — he plumped for a maximum of 30,000 — killed in the civil war, in the Indonesian intervention and in subsequent clan vendettas or who died as a result of famine and famine-related diseases.

How many people died in the fighting in August and September of 1975, and in the fighting following Indonesia's intervention when perhaps 3000 Timorese for a while successfully held up four battalions of Indonesian infantry and support troops, we shall never know.

One of the reasons for the early successes of Fretilin, the Left-wing independence movement was the highly sophisticated NATO weapons the retreating Portu-

guese made available before the Governor Mr Pires, fled to Atauro Island and ignominy.

Some time in July 1975, more than 13,000 NATO weapons arrived from Mozambique. On 27 August, the date Governor Pires left, Fretilin, with Portuguese foreknowledge, seized the entire Portuguese armory.

Since 1976, Indonesian armed forces have recovered 13,228 weapons, about 3500 hand grenades, 2817 anti-tank and anti-personnel mines, four tonnes of explosives and various types of ammunition. Fretilin possessed some items in astonishing quantities.

The recovery of this armory, the impossibility of dwindling Fretilin forces — now estimated at 180 hard-core — obtaining a resupply of weapons or ammunition, except what it can buy in highly risky negotiations from corrupt Indonesian army elements, and the clearly reduced presence of Indonesian and Timorese troops in large areas of the island leads to the inevitable conclusion that Fretilin as a force is finished.

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