

Vatican man backed over Timor claims

By RICHARD YALLOP

The Australian Catholic Relief organisation yesterday issued a statement deploring recent attacks made on the integrity of the Apostolic Administrator of East Timor, Monsignor Martinho da Costa Lopes.

Monsignor Lopes was criticised by a former Prime Minister, Mr Gough Whitlam, for informing the organisation last November that unless food aid was received in East Timor there was a danger of famine.

Mr Whitlam recently visited East Timor as a guest of the Indonesian Centre for Strategic and International Studies, together with Mr Peter Hastings, a journalist from the 'Sydney Morning Herald'. Mr Whitlam was reported to have accused Monsignor Lopes of circulating a false report that the province was on the verge of a famine.

Mr Whitlam told a news conference: "I cannot understand why he perpetrated this wicked act and sent this cruel letter."

The national director of Australian Catholic Relief, Mr Michael Whiteley, said Monsignor Lopes had been misrepresented in some news reports. "He did not say that famine existed in East Timor at that time, much less that famine was widespread. He indicated that only substantial outside aid could avert the expected famine." The organisation has sent \$110,000 in aid to East Timor in the past 12 months.

Mr Whiteley said that at about the time Monsignor Lopes wrote of the "expected famine" to the organisation the international committee of the Red Cross was asking the Australian Government to send 1000 tonnes of corn. "That indicates there was a shortage of food," Mr Whiteley said.

Last week the executive director for Indonesia of the US-based agency, Catholic Relief Services, indicated that some areas in East Timor were suffering food shortages, Mr Whiteley said.

Mr Whiteley also quoted Mr Hastings, who had written: "There are certainly pockets of population short of food in a desperately poor island. There is also a perennial risk of severe food shortages leading to famine in the first three months of every year."

Monsignor Lopes is Timorese and was appointed to the position of Apostolic Administrator by the Vatican.