

Famine loom

IN TIMOR.

Disruption of Timor's economy by Indonesian troops has caused a serious food shortage and possible famine in the island, according to a senior Roman Catholic representative in Dili.

Monsignor Martinho da Costa Lopes, the Apostolic Administrator in Dili, has made an urgent appeal for aid to the Australian Catholic Relief Agency. He said that food shortages in Timor are already serious.

Monsignor Lopes blamed Indonesia's military campaign against Fretilin guerillas for taking farmers away from their fields at crucial times.

But the Indonesian Embassy in Canberra denied last night that there were food shortages on the island.

Monsignor Lopes said in his appeal that Indonesian soldiers had forced all fit men between 15 and 50 to form a "human fence" through Fretilin-controlled territory to keep guerillas and their families on the move.

He said many Timorese, including women and children were killed in the operation, which had taken place in July, August and September last year.

As many as 500 Timorese had been killed in a four-day siege at a local shrine, the Rock of St Anthony.

Monsignor Lopes said the removal of the men from their villages prevented the planting of crops and those who returned were often too weak to work.

Some crops were planted, but this was too late.

"The result will be at least a poor harvest, at worst a famine.

"This conclusion is inescapable as the people now can do nothing to increase food production for at least six months."

There are no international relief agencies in Timor.

The Red Cross and the US Catholic Relief Services wound up their work in April last year and the distribution of aid has been left to the local Catholic Church.

The national director of Australian Catholic Relief, Mr Michael Whiteley, said yesterday that the monsignor's explanation corroborated what the organisation had already known and heard from other sources.

The organisation had allocated about \$90,000 for 1981 and this year to the East Timor emergency rehabilitation program, but church relief workers had requested \$250,000, mainly for food, medicine and care for orphans.

The press attache for the Indonesian Embassy in Canberra, Mr I. Poernomo, categorically denied last night the relief agency's reports and said that food stocks around Dili and other major towns on the island were sufficient.



Mr Whiteley

"There may be shortages in the remote areas of the Fretilin strongholds and they will not come down to join the people in the towns."

There were military operations, he said, but these did not affect people in villages.

The Government was, however, training people in the defence of their own villages and the training was after the normal business hours and involved males over 18 years.

The Australian Ambassador to Indonesia, Mr Dalrymple, had been invited by the Government recently to visit East Timor and he "would have seen what things were like for himself."

"The harvest time is going to be very good," Mr Poernomo added.

A spokesman for the Foreign Affairs Department said last night that the Australian Embassy in Jakarta was monitoring the position in East Timor.

"Australia has helped Timor with foreign relief in the past and would be prepared to help out again if required by shipping food relief direct to the island."

There had been early reports on "similar lines" to those of Monsignor Lopes about widespread killings in East Timor and these were being assessed.