

Timor's arithmetic of despair

Jakarta faces a huge task in putting an end to the suffering in its newest province

By David Jenkins

Remexio (East Timor): The three large Puma helicopters had only just settled on the outskirts of this tiny hill town when a Foreign Ministry official noticed something amiss in the welcoming arrangements. Along the dirt track leading to the town was a small red-and-white Indonesian flag flying upside down on a bamboo pole. "It is well-meaning," said the official, righting the flag with an embarrassed smile. "It just needs a small adjustment."

For the people of East Timor, learning how to fly the Indonesian flag correctly is one of the more minor adjustments of daily life. As many as 60,000 Timorese — one-tenth of the population of this former Portuguese colony — have died in the past three years, according to Deputy Governor Francisco Lopez da Cruz. Another 125,000 have passed through or are still living in squalid refugee camps, and officials estimate there could be as many as 100,000 more people still hiding in the mountains.

For the Timorese it is the arithmetic of despair, a social and political upheaval of such magnitude that its significance is still only dimly understood. Today, two years after its official incorporation into Indonesia, East Timor is in a state of deep collective trauma.

In Remexio, as in most other towns, the people are stunned, sullen and dispirited. Emaciated as a result of deprivation and hardship, they are struggling to make sense of the nightmarish interlude in which as much as half the population was uprooted.

Recently, as a party of foreign diplomats called in on Remexio during a three-day inspection tour of East Timor, they found bewildered residents drawn up in two rows, jiggling Indonesian flags and mouthing the words *merdeka* (freedom) to the prompting of local cheerleaders. It was, as Indonesian officials themselves admitted, something less than an effusive welcome.

"These people are totally stunned by what has happened," a senior East Timorese official told the REVIEW. "Thousands died in this *kabupaten* (district). The people are shocked both by the severity of the killing and by the recent political changes. Four-fifths of them wouldn't know what they are doing. I could give them a Portuguese flag and they would wave it."

For Remexio, a hamlet of 4,000 people in the parched brown mountains

behind Dili, the trauma began in mid-1975 when rival Timorese factions turned on one another in what was to become an especially horrifying civil war. Remexio was, almost to a man, on the side of Fretelin, the leftist political grouping which was seeking immediate independence for the Portuguese territory. In the months that followed, the town was to pay heavily for its political affiliations.

ATTACKED by members of the conservative UDT faction in late 1975, it was to suffer even more severely at the end of the year and in early 1976 as Indonesian "volunteers" let loose their full fury on Fretelin units dug in around the town. The scars of the recent fighting are apparent everywhere. Each of the half-dozen brick and mortar buildings in the town is pockmarked from automatic weapons-fire, as is the stately Catholic church which sits on a hill overlooking the main square.

The townspeople are undernourished and desperately in need of medical attention. Many have recently come down from the hills, where they lived on tapioca and leaves — and berries so poisonous they have to be cooked six times before they can be eaten. Tuberculosis is a major problem, and with so many people sleeping on the damp ground at night there is danger of widespread pneumonia. The children in Remexio are so undernourished that one ambassador said they reminded him of victims of an African famine.

Remexio is a singularly depressing place. It is not, however, by any means unique. Timorese officials say there are 14 similar "transit camps" in the province, many of them worse than Remexio. "This is nothing," said one official. "At Suai things are much worse and there are many more people. There is an urgent need for humanitarian aid."

Government officials make no bones about the fact that they face major difficulties as they set about the twin tasks of caring for the refugees and establishing the most rudimentary infrastructure in the province. "I have never seen poverty like this in any other part of Indonesia," Foreign Minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja told the REVIEW. "It is a legacy of 400 years of Portuguese neglect."

Now, as the foreign minister's visit

showed, the main problem facing the government in East Timor is not so much Fretelin, a divided and disputatious grouping which poses little military threat, but the care and welfare of the refugees. Unfortunately, the administration is severely handicapped in its capacity to deal with this task. There is a serious shortage of food, medicine and clothing, compounded by the problem of "bureaucratic leakages," the Indonesian euphemism for corruption.

In Remexio, government officials say, 56 people have died of "severe illness" despite emergency food aid which includes 0.4 kilo of rice per person per day for an initial three days and 0.6 kilo of maize per person per day for three months.

In Bobonaro district in the far west of the province, resources are spread even more thinly. According to the *bupati* (district head) of Bobonaro, Joao da Silva Tavares, a total of 36,000 refugees have come out of the hills in the past 12 months, some of them naked after two or three years away from civilisation.

MOST of these people were "very ill" when they arrived and a number of them died, Tavares said. To date 65% of these people have been resettled. Nevertheless, there are still many thousands in the towns of Liquica, Ermera, Maliana, Ainaro, Same and Suai, and additional refugees were still appearing, the *bupati* said, "because they cannot stand it any more in the hills." Fretelin guerillas order them to grow rice, he said, and then confiscate their crops.

Although acknowledging a shortage of relief supplies, Tavares strongly denied reports that refugees were dying of starvation in Bobonaro. Church relief workers have claimed that as many as 500 refugees a month have died of starvation in this district.

Indonesia is saddled with this enormous humanitarian and development problem as a result of its takeover of East Timor in December 1975. Alarmed by the prospect that leftist forces would come to power in the restive edge of the archipelago, the Jakarta government sent as many as 30,000 troops into East Timor as "volunteers." In a series of brief but bloody engagements these forces gained control of the major population centres, and laid the groundwork for a rushed political convention which petitioned Jakarta for "integration" with Indonesia.