

The Herald

Melbourne, September 11, 1978

Timor needs help now

AUSTRALIA has never been presented with a more clear-cut case for rendering urgent aid than with the plight now of the starving and sick people of East Timor. The immediate, on-the-spot commitment by a leading Australian diplomat, Mr Tom Critchley, must be backed up with an airlift of food and medicine in RAAF transports, and a movement of large-scale supplies by sea, using RAN vessels if necessary.

These people are suffering, and dying, virtually on the doorstep of this continent. The people of East Timor have endured more than enough. While they were helping Australian soldiers during the Japanese war, more than 50,000 of them died. In the civil war and the Indonesian invasion since 1975, another 60,000 at least may have died, on official Indonesian estimates.

From the time when the revolution in metropolitan Portugal demonstrated that the end was in sight for the Portuguese Empire, many people here and overseas believed that we should have joined with Indonesia to guarantee the East Timorese a better future. Strong Indonesian claims that they asked us to take an active role then have never been denied. We can make up for some of that now.

An economy must, in effect, be created for East Timor, and we must play a leading role in a task that will take many years even to lift most people there to the level of adequate subsistence farming.

Many Asians have been puzzled by the inconsistencies of Australian policies over East Timor. In all its implications, the affair has been accounted a major Australian diplomatic failure. We must not let the people of East Timor down this time.