

Disaster around idyllic Dili

RICHARD GILL reports from Dili

AT first glance sleepy Dili looks like anything but the capital of a province down-trodden by five centuries of colonial rule and ravaged by both civil war and military invasion.

Three Indonesian freighters lie in sapphire seas in the harbor, a stone's throw from a little settlement dominated by a handful of stone buildings — Portuguese colonial style — white painted and glaring in the harsh sunlight.

Around them are pleasant bungalows, village houses and huts and white dust roads.

Behind the town the mountains of East Timor sweep thousands of feet up to command the harbor approaches.

The dry rugged terrain looks more like northern Australia than the 27th province of the fertile republic of Indonesia.

Later as the sun goes down the more salubrious inner residential area has the feel of suburban Darwin before Cyclone Tracy.

Only after passing through the town outskirts into the barren hinterland do the consequences of what has been done to 650,000 East Timorese become obvious.

You could never tell from Dili itself, where the people are smiling again and the Volvos wait in bungalow driveways west along the coast to the military headquarters of Brig-Gen. Dading Kalbuadi, effective strongman of Jakarta's newest province.

Eastwards along the main commercial street the Chinese merchants' shops are well stocked with clothes, canned food, electrical appliances, Anchor beer from Singapore and nearly everything you can buy in a Jakarta market.

Johnson Walker Scotch whisky, which one shopkeeper says comes from Surabaya, sells at \$2.50 a bottle although the otherwise perfectly reproduced red label has a tinge of purple.

Imports are duty free and many other lines are cheaper than in Jakarta.

A small fleet of buses brought in by the Indonesians can take you anywhere for a six-cent fare and a hotel waiter can earn \$32 a month, just about enough to feed a family.

The statistics say that East Timor's people need 60,000 tonnes of rice to survive each year and that 97 per cent of the province's adult population is illiterate.

Starving

But only in the countryside where thousands are starving and barely anyone smiles does the truth come home.

Even before the civil war between Fretilin and the pro-Indonesian forces of UDT and Apodeti in 1975 the colony could produce only 25,000 tonnes of rice a year.

Since the war it has been worse, with only 12,000 tonnes produced this year and even less last year.

No one knows how many people fled to the hills when heavy fighting broke out after Portugal's hasty abdication of its colonial responsibilities.

But, according to Indonesian Government figures, 125,000 have come back down again after more than two years of starvation and exposure to malaria and TB.

Provincial government officials say that 20,000 of those who came back are still living in miserable conditions in resettlement centres and that another 5000 are still in the mountains, either too scared or too ignorant to come down.

One former East Timorese political leader tells me he believes that when a fresh census is finally carried out he will not be surprised if the population has decreased by 100,000.

"It is impossible to imagine how hard it is to survive up there in the mountains," he says. "There is nothing except what they can grow on newly cleared land and they have no clothes or medicines."

What is certain is that the repatriated refugees need fast humanitarian aid to prevent hundreds more dying from malnutrition and disease. And the whole province needs a massive development program.

From the air East Timor is an agricultural disaster area.

Ninety per cent of the province is barren mountain country with denuded hillsides. There are no dams and in the wet season which lasts most of the year the rivers carry what fertile soil there is into the sea.

In the dry season rice growing is out of the question and the province can only produce 15,000 of the 40,000 tonnes of maize it needs every year.

Since integrating East Timor into its territory in July, 1976, the Jakarta Government has spent more than \$16 million on a three-stage development and rehabilitation program here.

The Indonesians say they have hired thousands of public servants, including school teachers, and started agricultural training schemes. Work has also started on a major dam project in the potentially-rich rice-growing area near Maliana in the west.

The Foreign Minister, Dr Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, tells me it might be possible for other countries to help East Timor's development with direct government - to - government aid.

Dr Mochtar says the only snag could be that donor countries would have to give the aid without strings attached and might also have to specify it is for East Timor when handing it over to Jakarta.

Admission

This would be an effective admission that East Timor is in fact now part of Indonesia.

I understand that this would be no problem for Canberra, which is looking for Indonesian projects to spend this year's \$30 million Jakarta allocation on, because Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock announced on January 20 that Australia recognised the integration of Timor.

The Indonesians are also pouring in humanitarian aid in the form of food, clothes and medicines for the repatriated refugees.

But to the 10 foreign ambassadors and a party of newsmen who visited the resettlement centre at Remexio a few days ago, it is obvious that a major international relief effort is needed.