

EAST TIMOR: THE POLITICS of HUNGER

Why have 200,000 people died in East Timor since Indonesia's 1975 invasion?
Why have no international relief agencies been allowed in until recently? Why has the Government of Indonesia and the United States State Department lied about the causes of the famine? The answer to these questions is the horrifying fact that Indonesia is using food as a military and political weapon in its war in East Timor.

As the war in East Timor unfolded, Indonesia found that food was the most effective weapon against what had been an unconquerable resistance to their occupation. By destroying the crops and food production processes in East Timor, the people were forced into starvation and submission. At that point, Timorese were herded into "resettlement" camps—the only places where Indonesia made food available to them. International relief agencies were

kept out to ensure that these camps would be the only source of aid to the starving people, and to ensure that the tragedy and tactics be kept hidden. When international agencies were finally allowed to begin operations in late 1979, the restrictions that Indonesia placed on them made full and adequate relief programs impossible.

Food as a Weapon

The December 1975 invasion and Spring 1976 operations were failures in terms of the Indonesian expectations. Heavy resistance and casualties have continued well beyond the July 1976 official annexation of East Timor by Indonesia. Embarrassment over the failure and sentiment within the army for an all out war led to a decision to increase and intensify their brutal tactics. From

could not plant or harvest crops. Moving from village, Fr. Do Rego saw the massacres and starvation that resulted from the bombings. In 1978 a major spring offensive was mounted and by the fall its disastrous effects were visible. The people, starving, diseased and broken, began to move out of the mountains. News reports of the widespread starvation came out and visions of Biafra and Bangladesh came to mind. By early 1979 large numbers of people, including Fr. Do Rego, came down from the mountains into the Indonesian controlled camps in desperate attempts to survive.

The first phase of the Indonesian plan had begun to work. With a naval blockade around the island and no help from international relief agencies, food was cut off from the interior. The resistance and the people who supported them were succumbing to starvation.

"Slash and Burn"?

Indonesian officials blame the famine on decades of primitive "slash and burn" agricultural methods and the 1975 civil war. However, an International Red Cross team, which worked in East Timor for three months before the invasion, denied at the time that there was a serious food or refugee problem. According to area specialists, slash and burn agricultural practices had not had any significant, harmful impact on East Timor's mountain ecology by late 1975. Unlike other islands in the Indonesian archipelago, the soil in the mountains has sustained its productivity. Scholars attribute the breakdown of slash and burn practices in West Timor to the large-scale introduction of cattle herds by the Dutch during the colonial period.

Thus, it is ludicrous to assert that after centuries of slash and burn agriculture, East Timor's mountains have suddenly become unarable.¹

The slash and burn argument masks the real American justification for the "resettlement" program: It is simply Indonesia government policy.

The only long term solution to the present famine is for those in the resettlement camps who have been restored to health to be permitted to return to their former homes or similar terrain in the mountain regions. Certainly it seems doubtful that there is enough arable land within walking distance of the approximately 300,000 people now in refugee camps.²

1977 through 1979 these tactics were aimed directly at the Timorese people.

The Indonesian army set out to destroy mountain villages and crops, using planes, artillery and munitions supplied by the United States. According to the eyewitness reports of Fr. Leoneto Do Rego, a Portuguese Catholic priest who endured 3 years in the mountains with the Timorese, the slaughter intensified early in 1977. Indonesia began full-scale bombardments of the mountain areas.

By late 1977 the raids were stepped up. More modern aircraft, supplied by the United States (particularly the OV-10 Bronco), began fire-bombing villages and crops. Villagers were kept constantly on the move by the raids. With the

"Resettlement" Camps

The Indonesians set up key villages where the refugees from the mountains were herded. Being the only areas in which the Indonesian Red Cross (a military agency) and the army distributed relief supplies, keeping the refugees in the "resettlement camps" was a relatively simple matter.

By calling them "resettlement camps", Indonesia disguised their real purpose. By using these villages as the only distribution points for relief supplies, the Government of Indonesia knew it could keep the people in line and gain a tighter hold on East Timor. Although there was evidence of severe starvation, Jakarta failed to send adequate supplies, while thwarting any attempts by

way the Government of Indonesia was able to gain control over the 300,000 Timorese refugees located in these camps.

The Indonesians fully understood the consequences of their tactics. The Government of Indonesia has told U.S. officials that it plans to keep people in these "resettlement" camps and dependent on Indonesia for their survival. Food and medical aid are used in the camps to enforce the pressure placed on the Timorese people to support Indonesia's rule over the territory.

Aid Theft and Corruption

In addition to the use of relief aid as a means of political coercion, reports of corruption in the distribution process and outright aid theft have continually surfaced. Since 1976, reports have pointed out that the corruption has been both official and unofficial.

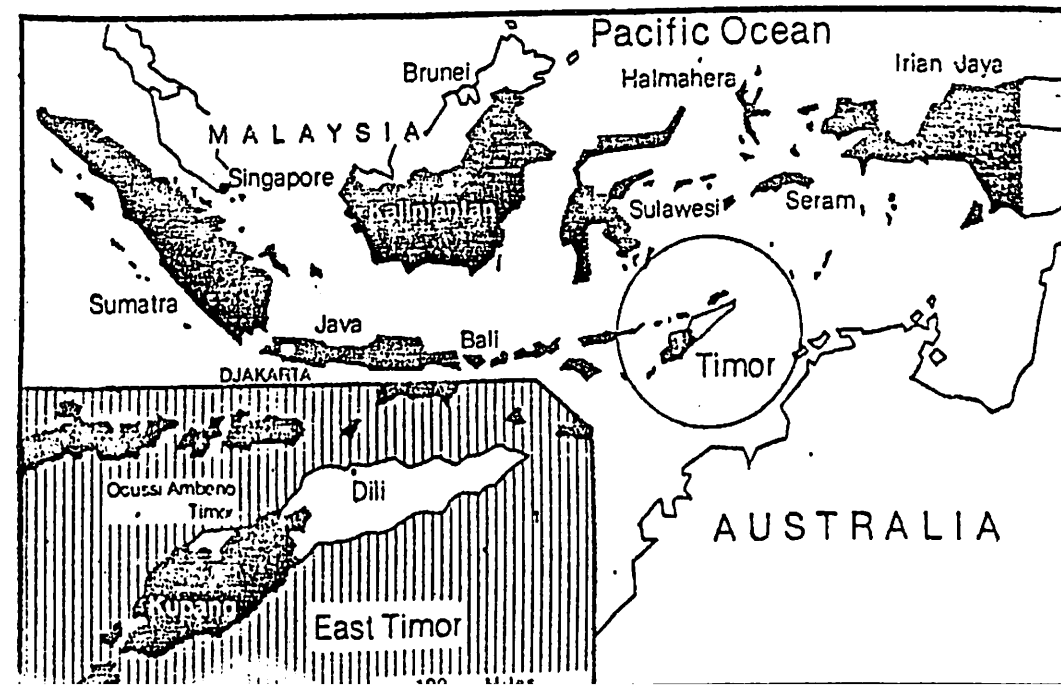
Widespread siphoning of international relief supplies by officials has been charged. Relief aid shipped through Jakarta doesn't always make it to East Timor. It is sometimes re-routed to other areas of Indonesia. There are also reports that aid brought to East Timor by agencies is then shipped back to Jakarta, the Indonesian capital. Even in East Timor, Indonesian sources have reported the relief supplies are often sold in black markets, or by officials for inflated and prohibitive prices.

Blood, Sweat & Coffee

A ruthless pillaging of East Timor's economic resources has been practiced. The country's high quality coffee exports have been subjected to a warlord-type local military monopoly. The company is P.T. Denog, controlled by General Dading Kalbuadi, the first Indonesian military commander in East Timor, personally responsible for much of its suffering, and now Commander of the 16th Military Region, of which East Timor has been made a part. Ironically enough, the Chairman of the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce (Kadin), not coincidentally President Suharto's younger brother Mr. Probosutedjo, recently complained publically about the "tragic" consequences for East Timorese farmers of this monopoly's operations. He stated that even in East Timor coffee purchased from the farmers at Rp. 250 (about \$.40) per kilo was being resold locally at Rp. 1,000 (\$1.60), and in Jakarta for about \$13 per kilogram.³

The Timorese sweat on coffee plantations in order to simply survive. The profits from their labor are used to continue the subjugation and slaughter of themselves and their brothers and sisters

In spite of this, Indonesia has refused to allow additional international relief aid workers into East Timor to oversee relief distribution.



The Tragedy Continues

Now that international relief agencies have begun programs in East Timor, the suffering is beginning to be alleviated somewhat. Their presence there has only confirmed fears and suspicions of what the Timorese have suffered under Indonesian dominance. They will continue to suffer as long as Indonesia continues to occupy their land.

In July 1979 the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the International Red Cross (ICRC) began relief operations. A preliminary ICRC report on the situation provided hard facts attesting to the horror. Of the 70,000 Timorese the ICRC visited, it found that 60,000 were starving. The situation was so tragic that it was reported that 20,000 more would die no matter what relief aid got in. Photographs of starving children that were smuggled out in the Fall were so revealing that they were banned from newspapers in Indonesia.

Despite all of this Jakarta denied that people were starving and kept restrictions on the CRS and ICRC programs. Just prior to a December Congressional hearing on East Timor, Indonesian and U.S. State Department officials were still busy denying that there was starvation in East Timor, despite continuing reports to the contrary.

In East Timor both the CRS and ICRC programs suffered under Indonesian constraints. The two agencies have only 4 non-Indonesian relief workers in East Timor. They are virtually unable to ensure corruption-free relief distribution. ICRC also operates under a financial constraint. Besides being underfunded to start with, half of their budget is

spent on renting helicopters from the Indonesians (who were again profiting from the tragedy).

It is all too evident that Indonesia is still using aid to coerce Timorese into accepting Indonesian rule. By allowing relief operations only through the resettlement camps, by staffing the operations almost exclusively with Indonesians, and by limiting the number and scope of relief programs, they are achieving their objectives. Recently, the ICRC expressed as much to the State Department. Both it and the State Department recognize that in addition to providing relief, the ICRC's presence also provides a measure of protection for the Timorese against Indonesian human rights violations.

From its initial invasion in 1975, Indonesia has continually squandered human life in attempts to achieve victory in East Timor. This has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands, and still more are held hostage for their survival in military camps. The London *Observer* recently reported that the tragedy continues, and it will doubtless continue as long as Indonesia remains in East Timor. Food and human life will continue to be used as a means to political ends.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Statement by U.S. Rep. Tom Harkin (*Famine Relief for East Timor*) before House Subcommittee on Asian & Pac. Affairs hearing on, (12/4/79), p8. p8.

² Statement by Bruce Cameron, *Famine Relief for East Timor*, p.15.

³ Prepared testimony of Benedict Anderson to the House Subcommittees on International Organizations and Asian and Pacific Affairs on *Human Rights in Indonesia and in East Timor* (2/6/80) p. 14.

Two New Resources on EAST TIMOR

- 1- East Timor Conference Report
- 2- East Timor Poster

available from —

Michael Chamberlain

c/o Syracuse Peace Council
624 Burnett Ave.
Syracuse, NY 13203

