

Crisis as President Suharto of Indonesia arrives in London tomorrow

Starvation drive against Timor

From Jill Jolliffe in Lisbon

THE Indonesians aimed to starve out the Fretilin resistance and in so doing have starved the whole of east Timor, according to an aid official who has worked in Portugal's Asian ex-colony. For four years East Timorese refugees in Portugal and Australia have been anguished but helpless observers of the systematic elimination—by mass execution, bombardment and, now, starvation—of their people.

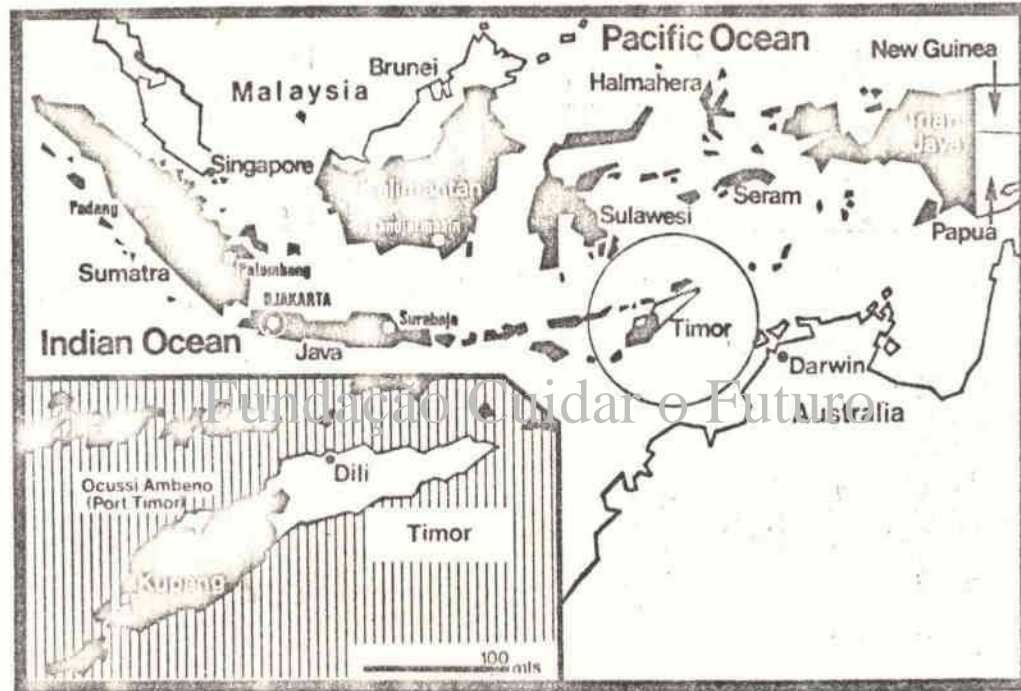
Today, a famine engulfs the country, which International Red Cross Officials have compared to that of the Biafran civil war, and is perhaps as severe as that in Cambodia.

The former Portuguese colony was invaded by Indonesia in December, 1975, after a brief civil war in August, during which the Portuguese Administration abandoned the territory. Indonesian troops landed in Dili, the capital, 10 days after Fretilin (the Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor) declared independence on November 28, 1975.

Human rights campaigners have since claimed, before the famine became public, that as many as 200,000 of East Timor's population of 650,000 may have been killed under the Indonesian military occupation.

Ruling a far-flung empire troubled by regional secessionism, the Indonesians justified their intervention on the grounds that a Left-leaning independent regime on their doorstep was an insupportable provocation.

Indonesian officials blame



Contrary to Indonesian claims, the priest testified that the invading troops had met widespread resistance.

He said that from 1975 the Indonesians had regularly bombed the interior of Timor, concentrating particularly on destroying crops. He surrendered in January, near starvation: in the last days before surrender he was reduced to chewing the hide of a buffalo.

Father Do Rego claimed that "about one third" of the population in his area had died since 1975, most from starvation. He believes that the Indonesian authorities had a deliberate policy of cutting off food supplies to starve out the resistance, but added that direct bombing of crops was not the overriding cause of famine. He said the constant flight of the civilian population ahead of Indonesian bombing raids and infantry advances in 1977 and 1978 had made it impossible for people to tend crops.

In 1976 a Government inquiry was initiated into the abandonment of Timor by the former Governor, Mario Lemos Pires. The inquiry reported directly to President Ramalho Eanes and its findings have never been published. Reliable sources close to the President say it is not likely to be in the near future.

Portugal is still, in UN eyes, the administering power in East Timor. But whereas in 1976 it took a strong stand against the Indonesian invasion, a recent speech by Prime Minister Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo to the General Assembly made it plain that Portugal no longer accepts a special responsibility for Timor.

the famine on the 1975 civil war, which, they say, disrupted agricultural production and displaced large sections of the population. 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.

The many foreign journalists working in the territory then also testified that civilian life and agricultural production had returned to normal by December, three months after the civil war. There is a weight of evidence that the famine is the

result of the use of starvation as a military strategy to crush opposition to Indonesia's takeover.

The International Red Cross has been readmitted to East Timor to administer a six-month relief programme, having been barred by the Indonesian Government since 1975. After international pressure, an aid team went there in July this year, to assess the situation and map out a relief programme. It reported that 75,000 refugees were gathered in 13 Indonesian Government camps, of whom 60,000 are facing starvation.

Of these, they say 20,000 cannot be saved — they will die whether aid reaches them or not. Since Indonesia invaded East Timor in 1975, there has been a steady trickle of information to East Timorese refugees abroad, despite rigid censorship of mail and a military blockade around the island.

Father Leoneto do Rego, aged 63, is the best available witness to the causes of the famine. He arrived in Portugal last June, after three years in the mountains with the Fretilin resistance, in the central South coast area.

