

RECORD OF CONVERSATION WITH THE APOSTOLIC ADMINISTRATOR OF EAST TIMOR, DILI,
31 JULY 1983.

THOSE PRESENT: Monseignor Carlos Ximenes Belo, Apostolic Administrator of
East Timor.

Father De Cruz

The Australian Parliamentary Delegation and Officials

(There were no Indonesian officials present)

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED: The position of the Catholic Church in East Timor.

After thanking the Administrator for receiving the Delegation, Mr Morrison said that the Delegation was conscious of the heritage of the Catholic Church in East Timor and asked Monseignor Belo to describe the situation of the Church in East Timor and its relationship with the Government.

2. In reply Monseignor Belo said that the religious congregation of East Timor consisted of 34 priests, 1 Salesian Deacon in Baucau, 5 Salesian Brothers, 1 Jesuit Brother, 2 SVD Brothers, 43 nuns belonging to 4 congregations. Many of the churches were without priests and many of the priests were sick and tired. He said that of the priests 15 were East Timorese. The others came from Portugal, India, Italy etc. but were working as East Timorese with a Timorese mentality. They had a Catholic congregation of 365,000 out of a population of 555,000 compared with a Catholic congregation of 300,000 out of 750,000 inhabitants in 1975. Monseignor Belo said that during the Portuguese time there had been 45 or 46 priests, many from Portugal and Goa.

3. A discussion arose about the phenomenon of increased conversions over the last 3 or 4 years. Mr Morrison said that the priest in Same to whom he had spoken that morning said that about 500 adults had been christened within the last 3-4 years, and thought that it was happening in many churches. Monseignor Belo agreed that there had been an increase in conversions, although it was not uniformly even all over the Province, and he did not have any precise figures. Asked about the reason for the increase in conversion, Monseignor Belo said he thought there were two main reasons: first that the populous could identify with the large number of East Timorese priests who now spoke, and said mass, in the local language; and second the psychological factor of seeing unity within the church as some sort of protection against the Indonesian administration.

4. Asked about the work of the priests, Monseignor Belo said that their main job was pastoral work in the parishes, but they also supervised the schools. He said that of the four congregations of nuns, two had been in East Timor before 1975 but the other two were from Indonesia and only arrived after 1975. These were centred in Dili. All helped in parish pastoral work.

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The Catholic schools, both primary and secondary, are mainly run by lay teachers from Java, Ambon and Flores. This is because very few East Timorese have had the opportunity for sufficient education to be able to obtain a teaching diploma so they have to be brought in from outside. The Teacher's College in East Timor was only begun in 1976 and was in full operation in 1978. So East Timorese teachers are only just starting to graduate. There are 20,000 children in Catholic primary schools and 3,000 in Catholic secondary schools.

5. The Administrator was asked about his predecessor Monseignor Da Costa Lopes. Monseignor Belo explained that Monseignor Lopes was not Portuguese but was Timorese and was now in Lisbon. He said in his view there was no reason for Lopes to have left East Timor, but he felt he was forced to by the political situation. He then described the use in the church of the local dialect. He said that until 1962 the mass had been said in Latin, and after that in Portuguese. Now the most popular masses were in local dialect, although there was pressure on the church to only use Indonesian. Senator McIntosh asked how many East Timorese actually spoke Portuguese. Monseignor Belo answered that in '72 he believed only 7% of the population could speak Portuguese. He said that two priests were currently translating the Bible and missals into Tetum. He said that while there had been an attempt made to translate a Tetum Bible at the turn of the century, this had not been successful and another translation had to be made now. He also said that the church was very short of all such reading material.

6. Mr Morrison asked how have the Indonesian Government attempted to influence the Catholic Church. Monseignor Belo said that the Indonesians would like to use the priests and Bishop as elements of integration. He said that the priests did not wish to participate in this form of politics, but they saw their role as being to defend human rights. He wanted East Timorese to survive, complete with their cultural identity as East Timorese, and felt that the church had a role in ensuring this after the second Eceumenical of Councils.

7. Mr Cross asked whether there was any noticeable discrimination against the Catholic Church in East Timor. Monseignor Belo answered that theoretically there was no discrimination because of the existence of Pancasila, but in practice there were some signs of it. At present Indonesian policy was to "go slow" on any move against the church, but he felt there was an underlying tendency. Mr Morrison asked whether this was related to the spread of Islam, to which Monseignor Belo answered affirmatively saying that Islam was very gradually being brought in by traders, soldiers and Islamic teachers. There was not any open pressure on the Catholic Church but it could be felt nevertheless. Asked whether this pressure was greater or lesser than any other countries such as in South America, Monseignor Belo answered that he did not like to think about the South American model. He did not want the church in East Timor, however, to be in a similar position to the church in Java. The church in East Timor had a duty to protect human rights. Asked about the Protestant churches in East Timor, Monseignor Belo said he thought there were only about 200 Protestants with two churches, both in Dili.

8. Asked about his position as Apostolic Administrator, Monsignor Belo said that his position was the same as that of a Bishop except that he could not ordain priests. He was directly responsible to the Vatican and the Diocese of East Timor was not merged with the church in Indonesia. In response to questions about the Bishopric, he said that in Portuguese times the Diocese had been connected with Goa and then directly to Portugal after 1962. A full Bishop would not be appointed until the Pope had taken the decision on whether or not to merge East Timor with the Indonesian church. His appointment as the Apostolic Administrator, therefore, was dependant on the will of the Pope. In answer to a question from Senator MacGibbon regarding financial support for the church in East Timor, Monsignor Belo admitted that it was difficult to be self-sufficient when the congregation was so poor. His church obtained financial support from the Vatican and some from MAWI, the Indonesian Bishops Conference, and were desperately looking for other sources of finance.

9. In response to questions about the church in East Timor and in particular about his own position as the Head of it, he said he had been given a very hard task. He was only young, and had only been ordained as a priest 3 years ago. He said he had studied in Lisbon and Italy before returning in 1981 to the Fatamarca School as a Novice. In March 1983 he had been appointed Director of the School, but then in May had been appointed Apostolic Administrator. He was faced with a delicate situation beset by many problems and with few priests to support him, but he would go forward with enthusiasm and hope. While he felt that the church was in relatively high standard with the people there was still few vocations for the religious life, although there were 25 people studying in the Seminary. Since 1977 there had been no priests ordained in East Timor. Asked about the relationship of his church with that in West Timor Monsignor Belo said that, despite the fact that the tradition in West Timor was largely Protestant, there was an assured Western christian culture tradition which had resulted in something of a similar outlook by West and East Timorese.

10. Mr Cross asked the Administrator what he saw as the principle problems found in East Timor today. Monsignor Belo answered that the principle problems related to the after effects of the war. These were exemplified by the Fretilin movement, the presence of large numbers of Indonesian troops, and the fact that East Timorese were still "living under fear". There were continuing breaches of human rights by Indonesian forces despite the fact he felt that the Indonesian administration were trying very hard to prevent these. Asked whether there was any famine in the Province the Administrator said there was certainly considerable food shortages if the dry season was prolonged. Mr Morrison asked whether any priest had dispensed Sacraments to Fretilin members in the mountains and whether they perform such ceremonies as baptisms etc. Monsignor Belo answered that some priests, including Father Locatelli, had gone to the mountains to say mass for the Fretilin. He answered that while here had been no priests present when Governor Carascalau met Fretilin Leader Sha Na Na on 23 March, on 27 March Father Locatelli had served mass in the mountains to celebrate Palm Sunday.

5. There was then a discussion on human rights in the Province, and the Administrator said that the military presence in all villages was very strong, and they appeared to do what they liked despite the fact they knew that the people did not approve of their performance. He said there was daily censorship of mail and admitted there were attempts to curb the freedom of speech. While the churchmen tried to speak out, the Indonesians were "very slow" on allowing freedom of speech. He said he was told that before the Delegation arrived in East Timor Government officials had gone to all the places to be visited by the Delegation telling the people not to speak freely to the Delegation, to pretend they did not know anything or that they could not speak English. Asked about the freedom of movement Monsignor Belo said East Timor was presently like the communist country where a "Surat Jalan" or travel permit was necessary for any movement. Asked whether this was different to the Portuguese times, he said he remembered being free to move anywhere during that period. Asked about the right of assembly, Monsignor Belo said that if they wanted to organise any meetings in the schools or churches they had to advise the authorities. If they ever tried to have a meeting without doing so they found that they were reported by two or three people. Asked his view of the new Governor, Monsignor Belo said that Governor Carascalau was viewed by all East Timorese, including himself, as the "hope" of East Timor.

6. A discussion ensued on the respect for other religions enforced under Pancasila, and the Administrator was asked of the church's view towards animists. Monsignor Belo answered that the church respected their beliefs and felt they should live and let live, but the Government did not agree as they did not fit in as one of the five religions recognised under Pancasila.

7. In conclusion Monsignor Belo thanked the Delegation for calling on him. He made the points that during World War II many Australians and East Timorese had died in the area in the interest of the protection of Australia. He was somewhat alarmed to see now that the Australian Government did not appear to have a clear policy towards the East Timorese people. He said that history had taught them that small peoples often disappear. He appealed for a clearer view. In response Mr Morrison drew a lesson from the Polish experience and said that the Delegation wished the Administrator well in the important task he had before him. He thanked Monsignor Belo for receiving the Delegation.