

Statement from the Multinational Humanitarian Mission

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Statement from the Multinational Humanitarian Mission

A humanitarian mission representing the Governments of Japan, Sweden, Thailand, United Kingdom and the United States visited Jakarta, West Timor and East Timor on 20-24 September 1999. We would like to express our appreciation to the Government of the Republic of Indonesia as well as to the United Nations and INTERFET in East Timor for their co-operation in facilitating our programme.

As concerned members of the international community, our mission's objective was to assess first hand the critical humanitarian situation in East and West Timor and to mobilise international protection and assistance for the affected populations. We had productive discussions with Indonesian Government ministers, the Governor of Nusatenggara Timor Province, UN agencies, ICRC, international non-governmental organisations, various civil society groups including the local

churches, human rights groups and some representatives of the East Timorese people. We visited several locations in Kupang and Atambua in West Timor that are hosting refugees. We also toured Dili including the ICRC-assisted hospital, and met with the Secretary General's Special Representative, UN Humanitarian Coordinator, representatives of international agencies, Commander of INTERFET, and TNI leaders. We also appreciated the briefing from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees who was in Jakarta at the same time as us.

Our principal findings and conclusions are as follows:

We recognise the efforts being made by the national and provincial authorities as well as host communities to assist the refugees in West Timor (currently estimated to be in the region of 150,000 to 200,000). They quickly mobilised essential shelter and food through the Ministry of Social Welfare and provincial authorities. We believe that those efforts can be encouraged through greater direct access to the affected populations by UN agencies, ICRC and NGOs. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has expressed concern at the continuing reports of intimidation and disappearances affecting some of the refugee groups, on top of the severe emotional and physical traumas already suffered by them in their departure from East Timor. Finally, the imminent rains will lead to a significant deterioration in conditions under which the refugees are sheltering and will endanger their health and well-being.

A durable solution to the issue of population displacement will include several options. Of the refugees with whom we spoke, almost all wished to return to their home areas in East Timor immediately or as soon as possible. Others prefer to remain temporarily in West Timor or permanently re-settle elsewhere in Indonesia. The Government of Indonesia also made us aware of its relocation plans under its transmigration programme. They also acknowledged that recognised international humanitarian norms require that all refugees and displaced persons should first be given the opportunity to make free and informed choices on whether or not to return to East Timor. Therefore, we encourage the Government of Indonesia to create urgently the necessary conditions whereby the populations of current concerns can do this with security and confidence through UNHCR. Access by the refugees to objective information about news and developments in relation to East Timor will be helpful to this process.

Allied to the above, refugees that have freely expressed the wish to return to East Timor should be supported to do so quickly. This would help to relieve the burden on refugee hosting communities and local authorities in West Timor. Timely return would also allow the opportunity to catch the forthcoming planting season in East Timor, thus promoting essential recovery.

The return programme should be conducted under UNHCR auspices to areas deemed secure by INTERFET, including special reception centres set up for this purpose.

The humanitarian character of all refugee centres should be respected and every effort made by the Government of Indonesia to separate armed elements from the civilian population. In the context, we also welcome the Government of Indonesia's recent offer to facilitate an increased presence by international agencies, especially UNHCR and ICRC in West Timor, to expand humanitarian assistance as well as to initiate family tracing and reunification efforts. We also support the request of local authorities in NTT province for technical assistance with capacity building on relief programmes management and promotion of humanitarian principles. We welcome the readiness of UNDP to facilitate such assistance drawing particularly on international expertise available in the region.

In our visit to Dili we were shocked to observe the widespread physical destruction of homes, commercial facilities and public buildings. INTERFET has made a positive start in establishing security but it is early days yet, and the situation remains volatile. Co-operation between the peacekeeping forces and aid agencies shows promise but will need to be further developed to assure appropriate priority being given to humanitarian and other civilian operations. Planning for the United Nations-led transitional administration in East Timor needs to be accelerated so that an appropriate framework to guide rehabilitation and recovery is put in place as soon as possible.

All international agencies recognise the urgency of obtaining access throughout East Timor, including Ambino. Immediate needs assessments should then be conducted and humanitarian assistance and protection made available, especially to the estimated 100,000 or more who are displaced in East Timor. Work on this has started led by the UN Humanitarian Co-ordinator and involving UN agencies and NGOs. The resulting Consolidated Interagency Flash Appeal for both West and East Timor is expected to provide a good co-ordinated framework for addressing priority assistance needs; and we urge all donors to provide generous support.

In conclusion, we re-emphasise the over-riding importance of improving security and protection in both East and West Timor. This is essential to assure the provision of adequate humanitarian assistance and to safeguard the basic rights of vulnerable groups.

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Jakarta 24 September 1999

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