

In 1969 the Indonesian Government announced the establishment of a "resettlement" area on the Moluccan island of Buru, where 10,000 political detainees, mainly from Java, would be sent. Chosen primarily from Category 'B', they were scheduled for indefinite detention on the official ground that although active communists before the 1965 political upheavals*there was no "hard" evidence against them on which the Government could bring court cases. The first group of 2,500 were taken to Buru in August 1969, and in July 1970 they were followed by a further 5,000 including a few women. It is believed that this is the first of several similar "resettlement" areas to be located in the less populated and developed parts of the archipelago.

Three official reasons for the choice of Buru have been given: its remote geographical position, over 1,000 miles from Java and so "far from sensitive, political areas"; its small population - under 5 to the square kilometre compared with 100 plus in Java, and its fertile soil. But the island's suitability for this type of settlement has come under sharp criticism from a large number of observers and Indonesian experts. They argue that since it is wholly underdeveloped - without even roads or any effective communications - all essential commodities from medicines and drugs to agricultural tools must be therefore brought by ship, an irregular and costly proceeding in this region, and one which it may be hard for political detainees to arrange. The interior is densely forested: trees must be felled before the land can be cleared for cultivation. The coast is largely mangrove swamp, and at least partly infested with malaria-carrying mosquitos. The indigenous inhabitants number about 30,000, although the number is declining, and form an ethnically heterogeneous and fragmented society: whether Muslims, Christians or animists, they are likely to be deeply hostile to the settlement of communist detainees on the island.

The present situation of the detainees is not known, but in December 1969 the first group was visited by journalists who described their way of life in some detail.

Detainees live in three camps, TEFAAT I, II, and III (an abbreviation of TEMPAT PEMANFAATAN - "place of rehabilitation"). These consist of bamboo and thatched barracks, perhaps 100 feet in length, and equipped inside with a four foot raised platform around the walls on which detainees eat, sleep, and use as storage space. The camps are surrounded by an eight foot barbed wire fence, with watchtowers at the corners. The first group of two and a half thousand were closely guarded by a detachment of 300 soldiers. At dawn the detainees line up outside the commandant's office and they are given tools for the day's work. They are then taken to the rice and vegetable fields and work until 4.00 p.m.

The official diet, 3 meals a day, consists of 500 grams of rice and bulgur wheat and 50 grams of salt fish. However, it is official policy to supply food and commodities for only the initial 8 months spent by detainees on the island; after this, they are to survive from their own efforts, each being allocated half an acre of land to cultivate. Thus official supplies were due to come to an end by April 1970. It is not known how this has worked in practice, but the current crop is a relatively good one so for the moment food supplies are probably adequate. Nor is it known whether detention conditions relax when official provisions finish: official policy on this is that the detainees will be restricted to particular areas for the indefinite future and may not either move freely within the island or leave it. Local inhabitants are expected to report any detainees who manage to leave the detention areas, which are in any case cut off from the coast by dense forest. As there have been no reports of alternative accommodation being built, we must assume that all detainees remain in the original encampments.

The journalists reported that the detainees they met in December 1969 suffered from scabies, TB, of which there were "numerous" cases, and malaria

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* See page 3 for Background to Detention

which was the most prevalent disease. They interviewed two medical students who were acting as doctors and who stressed that certain medicines were needed, in particular penicillin and the vitamin B12. Drugs are expensive in Indonesia, and it is almost certainly unrealistic to expect that the Government will make the long-term medical arrangements necessary for detainees' health. It is hoped that visits by the International Red Cross may soon be agreed.

Religious and political teaching forms a regular part of the detainees' life; they are encouraged to follow a particular faith and Islamic, Protestant and Roman Catholic places of worship were among the first buildings to be put up. The political philosophy underlying this spiritual training is reflected in one Indonesian journalist's comment: "It is hoped that after a span of time the men will again become loyal citizens of the Republic and abandon their Marxist ideas... or any intention of anti-Indonesian activities". From figures which are available it seems that many detainees - at least nominally - have adopted a religious faith.

The precise duration of the existing Buru scheme has not been stated. It was originally hinted that when detainees renounced all "communist" attitudes they could leave the island. But it seems that present official policy would favour turning the detention areas into permanent settlements. Promises have been made that wives and families will be allowed to join the detainees, but no date is fixed; this has aroused scepticism since families were kept in complete ignorance that relatives were on the 1969 lists to go to Buru, visits are impossible, and although correspondence has officially been sanctioned, the press were told in December that the cost of postage, pens and paper was too high for the present official budget. This means that for many detainees there has been no contact of any kind with their families since arrest, perhaps in late 1965 or 1966. In this context promises of family arrivals seem remote, and certainly any existing schools or clinics for the indigenous inhabitants would be unable to cope with an influx of several thousand wives and children from an entirely different economic and cultural background.

Indonesian arguments in favour of the Buru settlements stress two points: that Indonesia is an underdeveloped country and normal living conditions for all but the elite are usually frugal and sometimes harsh; that the problem of Javanese population density (70% of the population live on 7% of the national land area) is so acute that resettlement on the outer islands is the only realistic answer. While both are true, neither takes into account that the detainees on Buru are not voluntary settlers, cannot leave the island, and are sent there as "political undesirables". The scheme is thus not one of genuine resettlement but of indefinite exile for individuals whose offence was support for the Communist Party or one of its affiliates at a time when it was a legal political party holding 25% of the seats in Parliament.

The detainees in Category 'B', now on Buru, are those - in the words of the Attorney-General - known to have been PKI (Communist Party) cadres. In practice many were members not of the PKI but of the cultural (LEKRA), trade union (SOBSI) and youth movements affiliated to the PKI before its banning in late 1965; these were mass organisations, with many non-communist members, which claimed at their height as many as 17 million members, of which the PKI itself accounted for 3 million.

Many detainees are writers, intellectuals, or professionally trained doctors and scientists who have no experience of manual work and in any case have skills which few countries can afford to waste in exile, while many others, if the religious figures can be believed, can never have been the deeply-committed communists they were officially represented as being. Moreover, one Australian journalist commented on the youth of many detainees he saw and pointed out that a man of 23 who may have been imprisoned for membership of a left-wing youth movement, can have been only 17 at the time of his arrest.

On the credit side, there is little doubt that in the short-term, living conditions on Buru are better than in most Javanese camps from which the prisoners came.

SUGGESTED ACTION FOR GROUPS

It is suggested that groups write to four different Indonesian authorities:

1. The Attorney-General, who has overall responsibility for the Buru resettlement scheme and to whom appeals for reconsideration of a case should be sent. Groups should appeal for re-categorisation, so that a detainee now in 'B' Category would be up-graded to 'C', and so automatically eligible for release - see background paper on 'Situation of Indonesian Prisoners'.

Address: Major-General Sugih Arto,
Attorney-General's Department,
Kebajoran,
Djakarta.

2. The Foreign Minister, Mr. Adam Malik, who is responsible for representing Indonesia abroad, and who is therefore concerned that the country's reputation should be as high as possible.

Address: Adam Malik, Minister of Foreign Affairs,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
Djakarta.

3. The Indonesian Ambassador in your own country.

4. Major Rusno, the Camp Commandant of the Buru Resettlement Scheme. We do not know the exact address, but would suggest that you address your letters to TEMPAT PEMANFAATAN, Way Apu River, Buru Island, Ambon, Indonesia. Writing to Major Rusno you can ask for correspondence facilities with your adopted prisoner, sending several international reply coupons to cover the cost. You should also ask whether you can pay for his correspondence with his family, quoting the Attorney General who has said that prisoners are allowed to write to their families but given expense as a practical deterrent. You could also offer to send books and clothing, remembering that detainees are allowed to read only religious works.

Research Department,
Amnesty International.

September, 1970

*Background to Detention

On 30th September 1965 a left-wing coup was attempted in Djakarta and six prominent generals were murdered. The army swiftly took power and broke the attempt. A total purge of all PKI officials was ordered, and this rapidly became a wave of popular revanchism in which several hundred thousand alleged communists were killed in Java, Bali and Sumatra, and perhaps two hundred thousand more arrested. At least 80,000 remain in detention. Since 1965 the Government, now predominantly military in character, has argued that members not only of the PKI itself, but also of its youth, cultural and trade union affiliates, bear individual responsibility for the initial coup attempt. Thus, active membership of a mass movement - totalling perhaps 17 million in 1965 - has frequently been equated with responsibility for the action of a small PKI splinter group, whose members' precise relationship to the official Party leadership even now remains obscure. Each detainee was as a communist said to have been 'involved' in the coup attempt.

In 1969, the Government decided to release over half the detainees - those regarded as no longer being active communists, and classified by the Army as Category 'B'. Detainees in 'B' Category (perhaps 30,000) are to remain indefinitely in detention, while those believed to have been PKI (Communist Party) leaders before 1965 (given variously as 5,000 and 10,000) will eventually be brought to court and tried.

A P P E N D I X

This is an extract from the Djakarta student newspaper, Harian Kami, arguing for international inspection of the Buru encampments. Harian Kami represents an independent and liberal outlook in the context of the Indonesian press.

"Thus the conclusion is that BURU is possibly the best answer for the Group B political detainees AT THE PRESENT TIME, under certain conditions. The argument can be as follows.

It is no longer possible to maintain Group B political detainees in places of detention in Java because there are no funds and because they are indeed not going to be tried in the courts. Nor is it possible to release them because they constitute a security risk both for the detainees themselves and also for us, unless a not-obvious watch could be kept over them by an intelligence that works well. We do not possess that apparatus. Therefore, there is no other way except to accept the principle of "places of utilisation", and if the matter of the principle can be agreed upon, the question of their location is only a mere technicality.

There is still one more problem for us and the government: How to carry out supervision so that these places utilising the detainees do not degenerate into concentration camps a la Dachau, Belsen, or the detention camps of the Japanese fascists, or the places of exile for political activists as often used by the Dutch in the past. Given just a little scope by the authorities, both military and civil, for the ever-sharp spot-lighting of the press, that supervision can be made.

One method would be to open Buru to the international organisations under the aegis of the U.N., or to the International Red Cross, or other international body operating in the field of aid for humanitarian reasons. Then also, the press could be periodically asked to make an observation trip to Buru, not in such a hurried fashion as these last few days. Only through an open attitude can we explain to the international world a problem that certainly cannot be covered up.

And do not let us hear that the press which has made sharp criticism is not given permission to go on future occasions, under the excuse of "you've been there already". For it is precisely those who have once been to these places where the manpower of the detainees is utilised, who have materials for comparison, whether there has been improvement or not.

(From Harian Kami, 23 December 1969)