

October, 1971

INDONESIA : The Buru "Resettlement" Scheme

In 1969 the Indonesian Government announced the establishment of a "resettlement" area on the Moluccan island of Buru, where 10,000 political detainees would be transported in the course of the next three years. The aim was that they should form a permanent and self-supporting agricultural community to which they would be restricted. Chosen from Category 'B', many of these detainees have been in prison, without trial, since October 1965. They are regarded as committed Marxists and active members of the Communist movement before 30th September, 1965\*. The Government admits that there is no evidence on which they could be tried, but refuses to release them. They are therefore scheduled for indefinite detention.

The first group of 2,500 detainees was moved to Buru in August 1969, followed by a further 5,000 in mid-1970; 2,500 more are due to arrive at the end of 1971. It is not clear whether the final total will stay at 10,000; it may rise to 15,000. Official statements have suggested that similar resettlement areas may also be set up in other parts of the Indonesian archipelago. The Buru scheme is described by the Government as being part of a national transmigration policy to alleviate population pressure in Java and encourage economic growth in the under-developed regions of the Republic. But the detainees on Buru remain prisoners in all essential respects: they live under close military supervision, are required to work long hours as agricultural labourers, have no prospect of leaving the island, and undergo extensive "mental rehabilitation" which aims to replace "Communist" beliefs by a Christian or Islamic religious faith.

At the moment Buru is a wholly masculine community, but the Government has promised that some wives will be allowed to join their husbands, beginning in 1972. Ultimately the detainees and their families are to form a settled community of over 40,000, but whether or not this aim will be realised is far from clear. Permission for family reunion appears to depend on a man's "mental attitude" - which presumably refers to his willingness to renounce Marxist beliefs. If the detainees "prove themselves to be good citizens", their families can go to Buru, said President Suharto in April 1971.

Buru is an island of 9,600 sq. kilometres - about a third of the size of Holland or equal in area to Bali. It is a thousand miles from Java, close to Ambon, the main island of the Moluccas. It has a natural population of only 30,000. Most of the land is unpopulated forest, swamp or jungle. There is one small hospital in the capital town of Namlea; schools are non-existent and the best means of communication remains the Wai Apu river. There is a little trade between Buru and Ambon.

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 sq. 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 under-developed - without even roads or any effective communications - all essential commodities from medicines and drugs to agricultural tools must be 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.

Probably in response to this criticism, the Government has allowed visits from an International Red Cross delegation (March 1971), a group of journalists (December 1969) and from a well-known Dutch writer, Bep Vuyk (March 1971). Their published reports do not support fears that Buru is a new Devils Island. But it must be remembered that we have no account of living conditions from the detainees themselves, that all visits are organised by the military administration, and that the camp set aside for intellectuals - inevitably the most articulate spokesmen - has been excluded from each itinerary. On the other hand, although these reports draw an attractive picture of what is an essentially bleak situation, there is no reason to doubt that detainees have spoken honestly when they compared their lives on Buru favourably with the earlier time spent in camps or prisons on Java.

The detainees live in 13 separate encampments - TEFAATS (an abbreviation of Tempat Penmanfaatan 'place of rehabilitation') - placed along the Wai Apu river, and occupying about 335,000 acres. Originally barracks were built, but 1971 visitors described a few huts and houses which had been constructed in preparation for the families. Basic accommodation consists of bamboo and thatched barracks, perhaps 100 ft. in length, and equipped inside with a four foot raised platform around the walls on which detainees eat, sleep, and use as storage space. Immediately after their arrival in 1969, the first group lived in camps surrounded by an eight foot barbed wire fence, with watchtowers at the corners: they were closely guarded by a detachment of 300 soldiers. Life is now said to be much freer and visitors claim that some of the external characteristics of a penal settlement have disappeared. But no one has reported on all the camps nor is it possible to know the normal regime when visitors are not present.

For the first eight months after arrival, detainees were provided with food, clothing, agricultural tools and seeds. After this they had to live on what they grew. The official diet consisted of 500 grams of rice and bulgar wheat and 50 grams of salt fish. Each detainee is theoretically allocated half an acre of land to cultivate, but in practice work seems to be on communal fields. For families, the allocation will be raised to 4 acres. The first harvest in 1969 (official figures) brought in 316 tons of rice and 425 tons of secondary crops - cassava, sweet potatoes, etc. In 1971 this is due to rise to 360 tons of rice and 600 tons of other crops.

1972 has been chosen as the year in which wives may start to move to the island; the 1969 group of detainees will by then have adequate food to feed an increased community.

In the middle of 1971, wives were therefore asked to register their wish to move to Buru. A very small proportion - about 25% - did so. They had been told they could take only 1 child with them; they knew that the move was permanent and that there was no prospect of returning to Java. In the six years since the majority of men were arrested there has been virtually no communication between them and their wives. Occasional family visits, sometimes only one a year, were theoretically permitted to prisons in Java; in most cases families were not even told that a prisoner was on the Buru list until after he had been transported. There was a brief period early in 1971 when letters could be exchanged with those on Buru, but this then ended. The divorce rate among prisoners' wives is high, after so many years forced separation, while many wives have never officially been told that their husbands are on Buru.

The most detailed published account of Buru came from Bep Vuyk in March 1971. Drawing on personal knowledge of Buru and on her own experience in detention during the Japanese occupation, she came to relatively favourable conclusions about living conditions in the three camps she saw.

"Complex IV looks like one large test garden with nursery fields and fields ready for harvest. Maize is grown, cassava, various varieties of vegetables and beans. The one-year coffee plantation looks good, in another complex the first tobacco has been harvested, at the coast salines have been constructed, fishponds have been dug, into which mudjair, a quick growing fresh water fish was released. On a newly constructed sawa a man works with a motor plough.... There are four of these small motor ploughs, he tells us, but they are frequently broken and one has to wait for spare parts from Java. It is preferable to plough with cattle, Balinese cows being used."

"In the centre of this complex is a large open field to which lead five roads. Along these roads the family houses will be built. Work has started on the first two. This field will become the centre, where there will be an office, a Catholic and a Protestant church, the places having been already allocated. The mesjid (mosque) is nearly finished - an atap roof and half open wooden walls. Here a primary and secondary school will be built."

Detainees selected for Buru are under 45 and in good health; (the average life expectancy in Indonesia is 47). It is planned that each camp will have an out-patient clinic, run by doctors and nurses assigned by the Ministry of Health and assisted by detainees. Set against Indonesia's national shortage of doctors (6,000 for the 110 million population), and the doctors' own reluctance to work in such a remote place, this seems an unrealistic scheme. Despite valuable help from the churches and the Red Cross, there is an acute shortage of drugs and medical equipment. Anti-biotics, anti-malarial drugs and vitamins are urgently needed; a proportion of the detainees suffer from eye diseases - perhaps the effect of long detention and malnutrition.

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 erected. 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'. In the first year 1,300 detainees were baptised into the Protestant and Roman Catholic faiths.

The Buru scheme is the direct responsibility of the Attorney General, General Sugih Arto. He maintains that all detainees on the island have been PKI (Communist Party) cadres. In practice, many were members not of the PKI but of the mass cultural, youth, and trade union movements affiliated to the Communist Party, which claimed a combined membership of 17 million - many of whom were not convinced Marxists. Visitors have commented on the youth of some detainees, pointing out that men of 22 in 1970 can only have been 17 when they were arrested. One young man told visiting journalists that he had been arrested simply because he had played football in a left-wing student team on 30th September, 1965.

A substantial proportion of the detainees are writers, teachers, lawyers, or scientists, who have lived an urban life, have no experience of manual work

and, in any case, are trained in skills which few countries can afford to waste. For them, this hard agricultural labour and total absence of books (except religious works), newspapers or even pen and paper, are very particular hardships. In September 1971, the Attorney General was asked by foreign journalists if Pramudya Ananta Tur, the famous Indonesian author, was allowed to write. He replied: 'Oh yes, but he has no pencil and paper yet'.

During 1969 and 1970, Indonesian officials were adamant that the Buru settlement was permanent, that 'B' detainees would never be released and that this was thus their only opportunity to 'make lives like those of other people'. But immediately after the 1971 elections two senior ministers went on record as saying that this policy might be reviewed in 1972 or 1973, and 'B' detainees could then be re-classified into 'C', and released, or into 'A', to be tried.

In the past, Indonesian arguments in favour of Buru have stressed two points: that Indonesia is an under-developed 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 occupy 7% of the total 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 penal exile for individuals whose offence was to support the Communist Party, or its affiliates, at a time when it was a legal political party holding 25% of the seats in Parliament. The Attorney General expressed the situation graphically to foreign diplomats in January 1971: 'we consider that it is dangerous to allow them (the Buru detainees) to return to the community; they are still like a thorn in our flesh'.

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#### Suggested Action

Write to: General Sugih Arto, the Attorney General  
Kedjaksanaan,  
Kebajoran Baru, Djakarta.

Ask that your prisoner's case be reviewed and re-classified as  
'C' Category.

Adam Malik, the Foreign Minister  
Departmen Luar Negeri (Deparlu),  
Djalan Taman Pedjambon 6, Djakarta.

Your adopted prisoner - Tempad Penmanfaatan (Tapol),  
Pulao Buru, Indonesia.

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#### \*Background to Detention

On 30th September, 1965, a left-wing coup was attempted in Djakarta and six prominent generals were murdered. The army took power and ordered a total purge of all PKI officials; 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 70,000 remain in detention. The PKI was banned.

The Government has now decided to release over half the detainees - those regarded as no longer being active communists, and classified by the Army as Category 'C'. Detainees in 'B' Category (perhaps 15,000) are to remain indefinitely in detention, while those believed to have been PKI leaders before 1965 (5,000) will be brought to court and tried.