

they hawk on the streets. Mrs. Pramudya Ananta Tur, wife of Indonesia's foremost writer who is now detained on Buru Island, sells cakes to try and make ends meet. She suffers from a pulmonary ailment and requires regular medical treatment. Another woman, who once ran a prosperous building firm, is now herself living in a bamboo shed in one of Jakarta's poorest districts; her husband was arrested as a member of a left-wing trade union, and she is now supported by her son who bought a 'non-involvement declaration' in order to get a job as a barman in a Jakarta hotel. Her youngest son died two years ago because she could not afford to pay for necessary medical treatment. There are numerous other examples of human tragedy that have occurred among these neglected families.

HARASSMENT

The difficulties they face are not only caused by an absence of assistance from official sources. In many cases, the families are actively harassed by local military units who force them out of their homes and deprive them of their belongings. They are defenceless against such harassment and cannot even contemplate taking legal action unless they have financial aid for the lengthy court proceedings.

Another constant worry is that of finding out about the whereabouts of a detained husband. Wives who have lost trace of their husbands, either immediately after his arrest or as a result of transfer from one place of detention to another, are often treated in a very humiliating way when they make enquiries at any military unit.

The only source of succour for these families in distress is a small number of private organisations, mainly the Christian churches which, in some places, have started relief programmes for the families of political prisoners. One diocese of the Roman Catholic Church took steps to bring prisoners' wives together to share their problems and to try and solve them through communal effort. A chaplain took the initiative and worked out a plan of action; it included fund-raising by selling hand-made products, simultaneously providing the women with some form of employment. The money was intended to pay school-fees for their children. But, inevitably, such endeavours run into difficulties and this one was suspected of providing a cover for political activities. When the women participating in this particular scheme met together at

Christmas 1971 for a small celebration, one of them rose to thank the organisers on behalf of all the wives. A few days later, she was summoned to a military office, held for a whole day and questioned about the speech she had made. She was later released but the incident disturbed many women who had found some comfort in the regular get-togethers and common

effort, and they decided to stay away in future.

Relief projects are in progress in several major towns in Indonesia but they are still very limited in scope and can help only a very small fraction of those in need. The lack of dedicated personnel and regular sources of finance make these efforts little more than a drop in an ocean of human suffering.

Perhaps the best way to conclude the above account is with the true story of one particular child who, for the purposes of this story, we shall call Narto:

"Mrs. S. had been under detention for several years because of her associations with the left-wing women's organisation, Gerwani. Her husband had been murdered in an incident in Jakarta shortly after the coup attempt and, ironically for her, had been buried at the Heroes' cemetery in Jakarta because his death was thought to have been the result of an attack by communist youths. When she was arrested, she took one small child with her to prison and left her other children with relatives. The relatives never visited her and she had no news of her children.

One day some years after her arrest, she, together with several other women prisoners, was carrying garbage out of the prison where she was being held in Jakarta when, glancing towards the crowded streets, she suddenly began to scream: "Narto! Narto". The prison commander who was guarding the women prisoners on garbage duty asked her why she was shouting.

"That's my son," she cried. "Narto, my son, over there, picking up fag-ends."

The Commander saw the boy to whom she was pointing, and began to run after him. The boy, seeing a soldier running after him, took to his heels and fled. Many startled bystanders joined in the chase; the boy was soon caught and the commander dragged him back to the prison. Only then did the child realise that his own mother had been calling him.

He was dressed in rags and filthy from head to foot. His mother embraced him and carried him into the prison. By the time they entered the prison compound, everyone had rushed out to see what was happening, political prisoners and their military guards, criminal prisoners in the nearby blocks and the civil administrators of that part of the prison. It was a heart-rending scene, and everyone, guards as well as prisoners, wept as they watched the mother and child. The mother was torn between joy at finding her child after years of separation and anger at seeing him in such a wretched condition. Nothing could more poignantly have depicted the tragedy of so many families torn asunder by political events for which they are not responsible.

After bathing and dressing Narto in her own clothes, the mother discovered that he had been staying with an uncle who had found the responsibility of looking after him too burdensome and had made his life a misery. Narto could not stand the life and ran away. He had been living on the streets for weeks, begging, collecting fag ends and sleeping under railway carriages in sidings.

For some months he remained in prison with his mother, but the prison commander realised that the child must be found a home outside. With the help of the visiting Catholic priest, a place was found for him with a Catholic family and he was soon able to start going to school again after having missed several years of schooling."

Narto was saved from misery by a lucky coincidence. How many children live on as he once lived, with no escape from the wretchedness of life in a society that cares nothing - or is too afraid to care - for the children of political prisoners?