

Peter Hastings of the *Sydney Morning Herald* has suggested that radical Marxist priests in the Philippines lie behind recent criticisms of Australian aid projects there. BRUCE DUNCAN\* here argues that Hastings has misunderstood the viewpoints of critics and looks at the criticisms in detail.

# The dispute over Australia's aid projects in the Philippines — is the criticism justified?

READERS of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (June 29) were startled to find a front-page article headed "Christ's guerillas plot violent revolution". Peter Hastings, the paper's Foreign Editor, said that some priests were "extreme radicals" who "are in effect uncompromising Marxists urging violent change as part of the Maoist-oriented New People's Army".

Hastings claimed that he was basing his article on a report of a meeting of radical priests and nuns in North Samar Province. Hastings said Bishop Hobayan, who gave him the report, said he had "lost" eight of his 27 priests to the new thinking.

The "radicals" had fallen under the influence of the "new theology" coming from Latin America, known as liberation theology. "The new theology apparently holds that there is no such thing as personal sin. All sin is that of society as a whole . . . The new theologians hold that anti-Christ is a reality . . . only destruction of society can expurgate the sin. Thus salvation lies in revolution".

Hastings continued that attempts at social reform and charity are "merely cosmetic", according to this thinking. "To attempt to seek to improve present society is an act of wrongdoing".

Even the Church derives its authority "from the people as a whole in whom God has vested it. Finally, any man who sees

society in this light is in effect a priest", Hastings added.

The journalist admitted that this thinking affects only "a tiny minority" of the Church's personnel in the Philippines, and that this is only one position on a spectrum of Church opinion which stretches "from extreme conservatism" to joining Marxist guerillas. Nevertheless, he claimed that this extreme influence is increasing.

## Misunderstands liberation theology

Hastings appears to have come across a few social activists and religious personnel who have completely misunderstood what main-line liberation theologians are talking about. As outlined by a serious thinker such as Gustavo Gutierrez in *A Theology of Liberation* (Orbis, 1973), liberation theology would judge the opinions of those whom Hastings quotes as little more than gibberish. These people appeal to some of the language of liberation theology but do not understand it; instead they tumble into the most tangled Marxist brambles.

This is not the place to outline some of the liberation theologies coming from Latin America, but it is worth noting that Hastings has been uncritical in accepting the Filipino radicals' claim that they were articulating liberation theology.

Contrary to what Hastings says, main-line liberation theology does not deny the reality of personal sin; though it does emphasise how social structures and institutions can operate in sinful ways and where personal responsibility is not primary.

Nor would a respectable liberation theologian claim that sin can be destroyed

by the destruction of society. A Christian must hold that salvation comes from God alone, and that the Kingdom of God will definitely arrive only with the Second Coming of Christ. The perfect society cannot be achieved by man in this world. Thus this-worldly Messianism is misplaced and anti-Christian.

This said, however, Church teaching and Scripture are both clear that a person's salvation does depend on acting justly in this world and on trying to construct a world where all people enjoy the rule of justice. The Christian commitment to

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social change and betterment is an integral part of religious affiliation. Christians believe that efforts for a better world prefigure in some way the Final Coming of Christ.

It is important to note that many of the insights of liberation theology have been endorsed by Popes Paul VI and John Paul II, as well as by the Catholic Bishops of Latin America at their major assemblies.

Clearly, then, Peter Hastings would have done better to find out what liberation theology was all about, and not attribute to it the ravings of a small group of Filipino radicals.

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### A link with Church aid agencies?

This unexpected front-page article by Hastings was followed by a more serious one on July 7 relating his attack on the Church radicals to the Australian aid project in Northern Samar. Hastings said that the project had received "heavy criticism", particularly from Church bodies such as "Australian Catholic Relief, the Australian Council of Churches, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, and others, and thereby hangs a story".

Hastings said that most of the criticism was felt by members of the Australian aid team to be "ill-informed and politically motivated".

"But what irritates Australian project workers most are inspired reports in Australia alleging that their work is valueless because it does nothing for the people for whom it is designed, namely the poor villagers of Samar and Mindanao."

Hastings quoted a speech by Australia's Ambassador to the Philippines, Mr Dick Woolcott, saying that the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Australia "has, in a recent report, alleged that Australian aid projects are exploiting the poor and helping, by constructing roads, the military in its operations against the New People's Army". Hastings argued that these Church elements were the radicals influenced by liberation theology.

While some of these radicals remain "within the limits of Christian teaching" and aim only at bringing the Marcos regime to an end because they see it as corrupt and oppressive, there are others

more radical. "...the most resentful radicals are the angry priests and nuns who profess the new theology which denies personal sin and personal responsibility".

"It sees the real sin in existence as the capitalist world, which must be cleansed and restructured and, because it is part of that sin, the Church along with it."

It seems that Hastings was defending the Samar project against criticism from the aid agencies by linking that criticism with an irresponsible and revolutionary Church faction in Samar itself. However, as other *Herald* writers, Graham Williams and Oliver Robb pointed out, criticism of the project cannot be so easily dismissed.

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### The aid project

Church agencies have criticised the Australian-Philippines joint project in Northern Samar on several grounds.

Firstly, the project is taking place in a

region of "pacification" of the New People's Army (NPA) guerrillas by the Marcos military, and has been unduly influenced by the demands of the military.

Secondly, the project tends to benefit the better off people in Samar, and may leave the poorest groups even worse off in absolute, not just relative, terms.

Thirdly, the criticisms of the aid project reflect on the philosophy of development assistance in the Australian Development Assistance Bureau (ADAB) itself.

### Military involvement

The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) began its report in 1979 and concluded that the continuing "pacification" programme in Samar had led to the evacuation of 50,000 people, military atrocities and rape. The report said that these things have continued under the present military regimen.

The CCJP argued that 78% of the project cost is spent on roads and infrastructure, which appeared to benefit the military rather than the poorer groups. Only 8.3% of the money is spent on agricultural programmes, and even this amount was allocated because of the insistence of the Australian Government. The Philippines Government had not allowed for any agricultural component.

This fact alone would seem to indicate that the Philippines Government was not really serious about improving the living standards of the poorer peasants, but intended rather to promote export industries and make its military presence more effective.

One consistent critical group is the Samar Priests and Religious for Human Rights. This group also has linked the aid project with the increased militarisation of the region which coincided with the aid programme. By 1981, ten battalions were stationed in Samar, as well as paramilitary forces, making it one of the most militarised regions in the Philippines.

The island of Samar is the third largest in the Philippines, being 1,342,863 hectares, and supporting a population of 1.2 million. Yet despite its natural resources, it is one of the poorest areas of the country. The Philippines Food, Nutrition and Research Institute estimates that food consumption is 59% below the recommended level. And malnutrition and associated diseases are prevalent, as reflected in an infant mortality rate of 76% in 1974. Michael Whiteley of Australian Catholic Relief says that he has seen worse poverty only in Bangladesh.

The Concerned Citizens for Human Rights in Samar say that the export-orientation of the project defeats its aims of self-sufficiency. The project is "at best a palliative that will never bring structural changes that will free the people from exploitation".

"In summary, [the project] is a delusion. The people are being appeased and lulled by a promise of 'development' whilst the



military steps up its activities to bring the island completely under the muzzle of the gun whilst at the same time the exploitation of the majority of the ruling elite continues unabated." (*Asia Partnership for Human Development*, Newsletter No. 17, May/June 1982).

The CCJP report was researched with the assistance of the Concerned Citizens for Human Rights in the Philippines. The report explicitly argues that the project is serving definite political and economic interests in Samar. "There are forces and structures that deliberately deprive the

poor of the chance to improve the quality of their living conditions and thus assure a secure and better future for their families and communities".

#### Who benefits?

The main criticisms of the project revolve around questions of who benefits and by how much. Critics say that little attention has been given to problems associated with rural development and equity in the distribution of gains. The people who are benefiting most are those who are comparatively better off, though in absolute terms they may still be classed as

poor.

The CCJP report argues that "those who would benefit most are land-owners, local businessmen and corporations whose export crops and other products would easily be transported to the local markets and to the ports" (p7).

The agricultural techniques being promoted rely on high-yield varieties of rice which require fertilisers and insecticides. It is usually the better-off farmers who can get the credit to finance these improvements in production.

The CCJP argues that "the plight of the poor majority stands to worsen. More peasants will be deprived of their land and their livelihood as larger agricultural lands are devoted to export-crop production. As a result, the number of unemployed forces will be bloated".

The project does not aim at alleviating the basic human needs of the poorest Filipinos, but at setting up export industries linked with multinationals and local landlords and businessmen.

Critics would argue that the key to improving living standards for the poorest

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is through land reform and providing extension and credit services. But a report from the Community Aid Abroad says that it is precisely here that little has been done. By some stupendous oversight they "have not given any serious consideration to the prevailing tenant-landlord system"

If this is so, then what has the whole project been about, except the preparation of export plantations, with likely dispossession of the poorest farmers?

Evidence from Zamboanga del Sur, the other Australia-Philippines joint project, supports this judgment. Michael Whiteley said "The Philippines authorities recently decided to give credit facilities only to those growing export crops (such as yellow maize) and to withdraw facilities from the 500 or so farmers involved in the PADAP rice growing program".

#### Philosophy of development

It appears clear that the philosophy behind the entire project depends on the older 'trickle-down' economic theories of the 1960s, and has not learnt the lessons about how the benefits of economic development can either be channelled into overseas and better-off local groups, or distributed more equitably.

Concentration on production of export crops can have the effect of concentrating political and economic power in the hands of exporting companies, local and

overseas, and deprive the peasant farmers of the meagre benefits they already enjoy from subsistence farming. Indebtedness will drive many of them off the land.

Thus the overall effect of the project may paradoxically be to increase tensions and social conflict by creating a large landless rural proletariat.

The CCJP report indicates that Australian aid policy is not in fact doing what the Minister of Foreign Affairs said it should, i.e. accelerate "economic growth in developing countries but also ensure that the benefits of that growth go to help the absolute poor meet their basic human needs" (October 17, 1979). As the project is developing, it is based on a model which will further marginalise the very poor and increase the probability of class conflict.

#### Conclusions

What is clear from all this is that there are serious questions to be answered about

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the Australian aid projects in the Philippines. The independent studies by reputable Church aid bodies cannot be dismissed as radical or extremist.

The dispute raises questions about some of the policies still operating within ADAB, however; and it seems that the criterion of meeting basic human needs is being violated in the Philippines projects.

The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and officials from ADAB have been pursuing discussions for some time about the projects, and some progress has apparently been made.

It must also be realised, of course, that the Australian team faces tremendous difficulties in the Philippines, with personnel, contractors, local customs, the military presence, guerillas and the web of technical problems. *Outlook* hopes to look at these problems in a later issue.

If Hastings' articles, though ill-informed on some points, can help alert Australians to the real difficulties and dilemmas in such aid projects, and in fact lead to changes in policy where desired, then they will have made a worthwhile contribution to the debate. ■

