

News about Rice and People

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AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT VITAL TO FUTURE INDONESIAN STABILITY

Warning by Global Food Security Specialist

A key factor affecting the future stability of Indonesia will be its ability to ensure its own food security and continue the successful development of its rural communities. This was one of the messages conveyed by Ronald P. Cantrell, director general of the Philippines-based International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), this week during an official visit to Australia.

“There is nothing more important to any country than its ability to feed itself,” Dr. Cantrell said. “In Indonesia, this means rice production. But, vital as food security is, we should remember that rural development is another crucial issue. You only have to read news reports concerning the Bali bombers – and how several of them came from poverty-stricken, limited-opportunity rural villages before taking up their terrible activities – to realize what a difference thriving rural communities could make in Indonesia.”

In the Javanese village of Tenggulun, where one of the bombers came from, more than 20 percent of the residents have little choice but to work away from home in Malaysia.

The good news is that Australia and IRRI have a proven track record of successfully working together to help Asian nations regain stability through agricultural research and development and so establish peaceful societies run by democratic governments. For more than a decade through the 1990s, AusAID funded the Cambodia-IRRI-Australia-Project (CIAP), which helped that previously war-torn, troubled nation return to stable, peaceful life.

“There’s no doubt that CIAP was one of Australia’s most successful major development projects in Asia,” Dr. Cantrell said. “It helped turn a country that was a complete basket case – where several Australians had been killed – into a more stable, food-secure nation. Cambodia still has many huge problems to deal with, but it is able at least to keep its rural population peaceful and productive.”

IRRI is currently working in the troubled former Indonesian province of East Timor – again with Australian support, this time through the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR). And the lessons learned in Cambodia and East Timor are being applied in yet another troubled nation, Afghanistan, where IRRI and several of its partners in agricultural research are once again focusing on reestablishing agriculture and rural development as an essential foundation for any peaceful society.

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“There’s an old saying that the beginning of civilization depended on agriculture and so will its future,” Dr. Cantrell says. “Our experiences in Cambodia, East Timor and Afghanistan show this to be absolutely true and also suggest that agriculture has a vital role to play in Indonesia’s future. We are especially focused on helping Indonesia maintain its ability to feed its huge population – which is a constant challenge for the government.”

Last year, the World Food Program (WFP) had to step in and provide special food aid to 2.1 million Indonesian poor. According to a recent survey by the WFP, an estimated 1 million Indonesians have been forced from their homes by sectarian and ethnic violence over the past three years. These internally displaced people are three times as likely to be impoverished as the average Indonesian.

“We cannot allow such situations to get worse, and food aid is not the answer,” Dr. Cantrell says. “What is needed is access to simple, effective technologies that will ensure that Indonesian farmers can produce enough food to feed their nation and, in the process, provide the work and livelihoods needed to keep their society functioning properly.”

In a special report to IRRI last year, senior Indonesian agricultural scientists identified declining growth in rice productivity as their No. 1 national concern, citing a sharp drop in the rate of rice-productivity improvement over the past decade.

“With more than 20 million rice farmers and just under 20 percent of its GDP dependent on agriculture, Indonesia clearly poses considerable potential for problems caused by inadequacy in its rice production,” Dr. Cantrell says. “We look forward to continuing our successful relationship with AusAID and ACIAR in dealing with such challenges. If we have the resources, such problems can be overcome. Indonesia is a nation with great promise, and like all good neighbors Australia is clearly committed to doing all it can to help Indonesia achieve its potential.”

IRRI is the world’s leading international rice research and training center. Based in the Philippines and with offices in 11 other countries, it is an autonomous, nonprofit institution focused on improving the well being of present and future generations of rice farmers and consumers, particularly those with low incomes, while preserving natural resources. IRRI is one of 16 Future Harvest centers funded the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), an association of public and private donor agencies.

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