

GET THE FACTS ON THE ABORIGINES

IN the unhappy story of the aborigines reported to be starving in the Warburton Ranges area of West Australia, the most urgent need is to discover the truth. Until the facts are settled beyond dispute, argument will take the place of action, and aid, if it is needed, will be indefinitely delayed.

So far, the principal evidence in the case rests upon a report by a West Australian parliamentary committee. This report may very well be true in every detail, but the ordinary citizen, bewildered by subsequent denials, evasions and political disputation, can no longer be sure one way or the other.

All he can be sure of is a burning sense of shame that there is nothing but argument while, for all he knows, thousands of his fellow human beings out there in the desert may be starving, dying, suffering the miseries of the damned.

If the reports are true, then every Australian must be ashamed that such things can happen in this day and age. Missionaries have been sending in disturbing stories for years, and, with modern communications and transport techniques, inquiry could have been made and aid sent long before the situation reached the point of disaster.

If, on the other hand, the reports are not true, then this should be established urgently, so as to prevent the persistent stories that are doing this country incalculable harm abroad.

Reports of ill-treatment or neglect of native races by "white masters" circulate freely among African and Asian peoples, and do immense harm to the reputation of the nation concerned. So far, Australia's reputation in such matters is better than most, and her chance of cementing friendships among the rising Afro-Asian nations is high. That is why this story must either be proved or scotched with the utmost urgency.

The West Australian Minister for Native Welfare (Mr. Brady) is going to the Warburton Ranges area early in February, with the leader of the parliamentary committee (Mr. Grayden). This is not soon enough, nor, in view of the disputes of the last few weeks, is it good enough to allay dismay. A further parliamentary report may still be too political to satisfy.

What is needed is a quick, independent inquiry, made by somebody whose word would carry weight and conviction. The University of West Australia is sending an expedition this week to study the area, and such a body of trained observers would be well qualified to establish the truth.

It is true that the expedition is not being sent for the purpose, but to carry out general anthropological research. Nevertheless, the opportunity is too good to let pass. The expedition can surely be asked to make a report on the nutrition and general welfare of the aborigines its first priority, and so clear the way for action.