No matter how far away a person is from their home, it is never far from their heart. Bangladeshis have proven this repeatedly, including this year. Non-resident Bangladeshis working and studying abroad conveyed their solidarity with thousands of protesters of the Shahbag movement through photos on the internet of their own sit-ins wherever they were – proud of their home and their people and not afraid to declare it.

In 1971, when Bangladesh was being born out of a nine-month bloody civil war, the people of this new nation abroad were just as passionate about doing their part from wherever they were. Rallies were held, interviews to the press were given, memorandums handed to governments, and money was raised for refugees and the 'rebel' government.



PHOTO COURTESY: LIBERATION WAR MUSEUM

Bengalis protested against West Pakistan's military crackdown in East Pakistan on the streets on Calcutta.

Home is Where the Heart is

With Independence Day around the corner, the Star looks at stories of Bangladeshis and others who did their part for the Liberation War while abroad in 1971

SORAYA AUER



PHOTO COURTESY: LIBERATION WAR MUSEUM

Sheikh Ahmed Jalal organised major campaigns to win the support of Japan.

"We did not join the front [line] with arms in hand, but what we did was create news and awareness," says Mohiuddin Ahmed, a former diplomat. At 27 years old, the young diplomat, a second secretary at the Pakistan High Commission of London, caused a media stir in the UK when on 1 August 1971 he 'defeated', a word Ahmed does not like to use. "We say that we had left the job and expressed our allegiance to the government of Bangladesh. It caused a great excitement because I was the first Bangladeshi to do that in Europe." Ahmed recalls six Bengalis at the High Commission in London; all except one followed his example in the following months and resigned. "The deputy high commissioner who was a Bengali did not resign. He remained for Pakistan and continued service to the Pakistan government."

"I had wanted to give my resignation long before, on April 10 actually, but was advised by Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, who led the diplomatic front outside India, to wait until more things were put into place," says Ahmed. Immediately after his resignation he spent time with his heavily pregnant wife and awaited instructions.

"The next morning the Pakistan High Commission called me and told me 'forget what happened yesterday, come back, join us' and I very politely but strongly declined," Ahmed adds, "But then he called me again after two hours and asked me to return my diplomatic passport as well as that of my wife's. They even wrote to the London Transport Authority advising them to take back my diplomatic licence because I was no longer a diplomat. And it's true that yes, once I left the Pakistan High Commission, I did not hold diplomatic status anymore because Bangladesh was not recognised."

For a short time, Ahmed and his Bengali colleagues were men without a country, "I was not a Pakistan citizen, or a Bangladeshi at the time, and I was not British." He recalls, "We used to call ourselves the 'beggar's brigade' in London with no citizenship. It didn't worry us really and I didn't fear being deported. We were aware that while the UK was not openly supporting us, they had all their sympathies for us."

Ahmed recalls how there were still serious concerns for his family back in Bangladesh. "It was quite terrifying for my family because I could not