alert them earlier. They were in mortal fear of what would happen to them because I'd given up my job and put them at great risk. My father, younger brothers and mother were moving from one place to another, taking shelter and I remember there was a case filed against me for treason," he adds, chuckling at the memory, "But they couldn't prosecute me because Bangladesh became independent before they could get hold of me."

From the end of August '71, a Bangladesh Mission was opened in London, and it welcomed Bengali diplomats who had left the Pakistani Foreign Service around the world. "Diplomats were advised to resign by October 7 and join in London or Calcutta," explains Ahmed. "One of our most important tasks was to get the UK to recognise Bangladesh but we had also been campaigning among other countries also." Ahmed gives the example of Cuba, which met with the Mission's chief, Abu Chowdhury, and recalls how other countries "kept their distance from us" because of their existing relations to Pakistan. After an extensive awareness raising campaign about the atrocities of the Liberation War, in February '72, the UK formally recognised Bangladesh, two months after the war ended.



The 1st August rally at Trafalgar Square is said to be the biggest gathering of Bangladeshis to date. PHOTO COURTESY: LIBERATION WAR MUSEUM

Ahmed however believes that his contribution cannot be compared to that of those who risked their lives. "There were people who were sacrificing their lives so I did the least I could do. I was never in danger of losing my life so I still don't consider myself a real freedom fighter though I have been given that honour. It was a very exciting time for us and I am humbled and honoured that I had a small role in the Liberation War."

Bengalis abroad supported the war not only in a professional capacity but in a personal one too. While studying and teaching in the US, Grameen Bank founder Dr Muhammad Yunus and Research Inititives, Bangladesh (RIB) Chairman Shamsul Bari brought out a regular 'Bangladesh Newsletter' which chronicled the movement of the Liberation War for non-resident Bangladeshis living in America, alerting them to the progress and how they could get involved.

Hundreds gathered with banners on the pavement outside Capitol Hill, Washington DC, for a rally on 29 March '71, protesting against the Pakistani genocide and to support Bangladesh's call for independence. This scene was repeated on streets across the globe from Tokyo to London. Spontaneous support groups formed, like the Bangladesh Emergency Welfare Appeal in Michigan, USA, which raised money for refugees in Calcutta through radio, newspaper and TV appeals and church meetings.

Despite hurdles, non-resident Bangladeshis in Japan played a determined role to have their new country recognised. Sheikh Ahmed Jalal, who studied in Japan in the '60s and then worked as a journalist there, and others launched major campaigns to gain the support of Japanese politicians, researchers, teachers and public.

While passionate about their home, Bengalis were not alone in their fight for recognition abroad. Citizens of other nations joined their cause and stood beside them at rallies and talks. French philosopher André Malraux said he'd leave for East Pakistan and fight "under Bengali orders". While too old to actually do this at 69, Malraux's gesture and declaration of support was noted by Europe as he was a well known liberation fighter, having fought in both the Spanish and Chinese Civil Wars and for the French Resistance during World War Two.

Most famous of all foreign contributions is perhaps The Concert of Bangladesh on 1 August 1971 organised by George Harrison, lead guitarist of the Beatles, and Ravi Shankar, the legendary sitar player. In an informal interview two days after the concerts, edited by Michael Vosse, Ravi Shankar said, "To me the whole feeling of Bangla Desh has been quite a personal one, because I happen to be a Bengali... they were running for their lives, and so many were killed, including my distant relatives, many friends, including muslim friends." He went on to say that the money raised for the nearly eight million refugees of the '70 Bhola cyclone and '71 civil war might only be enough for a matter of days, "but that's not the point," he said. "It's like trying to ignite – to pass on the responsibility as much as possible to everyone else. I think this aim has been achieved."

Bengalis abroad and foreigners knew their roles were different to those on the ground of Bangladesh's Liberation War, but history shows that it was the essential combination of every effort that gave Bangladesh the independence it celebrates every 26 March and 16 December. ■