



Paul Connett and Ellen Connett.

PHOTO: ANSAR AHMED ULLAH

# Connetts risked their lives for Bangladesh in '71

**On hearing the news of genocide being carried out by the Pakistani military against the Bengalis, Paul Connett and Ellen Connett became proactive in fetching support for the oppressed Bengalis in East Pakistan and helped form two organisations in London named 'Action Bangladesh' and 'Operation Omega'. They recognised what was happening in Bangladesh was an eerie echo of what they had witnessed in Biafra - atrocities and oppression that the world seemed content to ignore.**

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When the war broke out, Paul Connett and Ellen Connett had just returned from the US being involved in the Biafra campaign. While Paul Connett formed 'Action Bangladesh', Ellen Connett, who believed in direct action, co-founded "Operation Omega" with Roger Moody, an editor at Peace News. Members of 'Operation Omega', acquired an old Second World War ambulance and drove it to Bangladesh. Subsequently, she was arrested as she entered Bangladesh and imprisoned, only to be released by allied Bengali freedom fighters and Indian forces days before the final victory. While imprisoned, she discovered that she was pregnant and on returning to the UK gave birth to her son, naming him Peter William Mujib Connett.

The first time I came across the name Connett was in 2006 when we interviewed C A S Kabir, who mentioned, "So we participated, there were so many groups being formed, I also belonged to a group. My group was not Bengali people; my group was English people, plus other European people; there were two groups actually; one was called 'Operation Omega', and the other was called 'Action Bangladesh'. Paul Connett, a school teacher, led Action Bangladesh, and another leader was Marietta Procopé, an Oxford graduate, and 'Operation Omega' was run by Ellen Connett and Roger Moody.

C A S Kabir recalls going to France to demonstrate outside the Paris Consortium to stop grants to the Pakistan government. With one Pakistani flag in hand, Paul Connett went in front of the Pakistan High Commission and said 'Joi Bangla'. The TV recorded that, and behind Paul Connett, Marietta Procopé was there with another Bangladesh flag. So, two white persons were demonstrating against the military attack on the people of Bangladesh. One interviewer at that time from the television questioned Paul, 'You are a single person, and you are an Englishman; how can you free Bangladesh from the rule of the military junta?'. Paul, with his confidence at that time, declared, 'You watch and see what we can do,' later, he was able to draw 25,000 people to a demonstration in Trafalgar Square on 1 August 1971.

Then, in 2012, when the Bangladesh govt was looking for them, the Bangladesh High Commission in London contacted me to find him, which I was unable to do at the time.

I finally found them through an Indian documentary film-maker, Krishnendu Bose, and interviewed

them on 16 Oct 2023 in their Preston Park, Brighton residence. Today, both Paul and Ellen are in their 80s but still are passionate about Bangladesh and their activism on several other human rights and environmental issues.

In 1971, Paul Connett, an Englishman and an American Ellen Connett, refused to sit quietly and worked to raise public awareness in London about the brutal killings which were going on in Bangladesh during the 1971 Liberation War. From 1968-70, they were in the US campaigning for Biafra, the breakaway region of Eastern Nigeria, but which was finally crushed by the Nigerian army in December 1969. This put Paul in quite a quandary in many respects. He had to return to England because he was on a student visa, which had been extended to allow his humanitarian work in Biafra. Paul had started a PhD in biochemistry at Cornell University before becoming caught up in the turmoil of the Vietnam peace movement and the McCarthy for President campaign. This in turn had led to his involvement in the Biafra campaign for which he became the President to the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive. Now that Biafra had fallen, Paul's visa was no longer being extended and he had to abruptly leave his studies and humanitarian efforts behind to return to England.

Paul had initially gone to America to pursue his PhD studies at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY. His research director was Robert Holly, who later went on to win the Nobel Prize in biochemistry for his work on nucleic acids. While there, he became caught up in the activism sweeping college campuses at the time. The Vietnam Peace Movement and McCarthy's presidential campaign ignited a passion for activism within Paul. Campaigning for various causes became a part of his life. Paul met Ellen during his time as an activist around the Biafran cause. Ellen shared Paul's passion for the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Biafra. The two bonded over their shared desire and got married in March 1970.

The newlywed couple made their way back to Europe. It was a bittersweet time for Paul and Ellen. Their shared experience in Biafra had fostered a deep commitment to one another and to helping others. Paul and Ellen felt they

had learned invaluable lessons from their time working on Biafra and were determined to keep the remarkable coalition they had built together. The alliance had brought together people across the ideological spectrum - from the far right to the far left - who cared more about human justice and lives than political divisions. This extraordinary mobilisation spanned the United States and much of Europe, with strong movements in England, Denmark, Germany, and France.

After returning to London, Paul and Ellen attended a meeting at Peace News headquarters

being carried out by the Pakistani military against the Bengalis, Paul Connett and Ellen Connett became proactive in fetching support for the oppressed Bengalis in East Pakistan and helped form two organisations in London named 'Action Bangladesh' and 'Operation Omega'. They recognised what was happening in Bangladesh was an eerie echo of what they had witnessed in Biafra - atrocities and oppression that the world seemed content to ignore. They organised numerous activities relating to the 'Stop Genocide' and 'Recognise Bangladesh' campaigns. Other activists who worked with Paul and Ellen were Roger Moody, Ben Whitaker, Marietta Procopé and several MPs. There were also many Bengali students living in London actively involved. Drawing on their coalition's diverse skills and passions, Action Bangladesh would advocate for the recognition of Bangladesh and pressure world leaders to intervene. It was born out of the ashes of Biafra but focused on a new mission. Paul and Ellen threw themselves into this new effort with zeal, determined not to let the momentum and solidarity of their extraordinary movement fade away.

At one of the planning meetings, Michael Barnes MP stated that the Bangladesh situation was even clearer than Biafra had been. He argued they should immediately call for recognising Bangladesh's independence. One of Action Bangladesh's

first initiatives was running an advertisement in the Times of London aimed at Foreign Secretary Alec Douglas Hume. It implored him not to dismiss the atrocities in Bangladesh as an "internal problem", stating that stopping genocide was everyone's problem. In just a few days, Paul and Ellen gathered influential voices to endorse the message, including former Nobel Peace Prize winner Philip Noel-Baker, writer Ben Whitaker, musicians like Yehudi Menuhin and many others.

Marietta Procopé's home at 34 Stratford Villas, Camden, became the headquarters for Action Bangladesh as their campaign gained momentum. Every evening, Bengali students and activists would gather there to coordinate their efforts. Together, they would create posters for upcoming rallies, discuss strategies, and mobilise

support. Marietta's tiny home was abuzz with passionate activity late into the night as this diverse group planned events to raise awareness about the atrocities happening in Bangladesh.

To form a public opinion to act against the Pakistani military and government and recognise Bangladesh, they organised the largest gathering in London's Trafalgar Square on 1 August 1971. It included the first British broadcast of the song 'Bangladesh' by George Harrison of the Beatles. Ravi Shankar had approached George Harrison to help with the Bengali's cause. In addition to this song, George helped organise a huge Maddison Square Garden concert.

Not surprisingly, the Pakistani government responded with a demonstration of its own a few weeks later. They brought in busloads of Pakistanis from the Midlands to have their own rally in Trafalgar Square. When Paul and others heard this would happen, they plotted a little counter-demonstration. Their budget was low, and they could not plan anything big. Instead, they had to be creative and produce something small but colourful enough to attract TV coverage. According to Paul, they hired army uniforms and dummy rifles to look like the Pakistani Army. They hired sound equipment and made some recordings of gunfire. They drove three carloads of made-up 'soldiers' into Grosvenor Square. They organised a simple demonstration of women and children in white saris marching in a circle in front of the American Embassy with placards protesting the US armaments being sent to Pakistan. The BBC were tipped off. The soldiers jumped out of the three cars, and with the sound of truck-blazing gunfire, they advanced on the peaceful demonstration. The women and children had little packets of stage blood in their hands, and as the guns blazed, they smeared these over their white saris and vests and collapsed to the ground, screaming with terror. Their little demonstration achieved equal time with the Pakistani demonstration, which would have cost thousands of pounds to organise, on the evening news!

While Action Bangladesh focused on traditional activism, like organising demonstrations and writing letters and petitions, Operation Omega took a more direct relief approach. Ellen helped to found this organisation. She felt compelled to provide on-the-ground assistance to the Bengali people suffering in the crisis. After witnessing Biafra, she was weary of activism from afar.

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Operation Omega volunteers cross into Bangladesh on August 17, 1971.