

THE

NATIONAL

ARCHIVES

# The Independence of Bangladesh in 1971

What can British documents tell us about the creation of Bangladesh?

Key Stage 3 | Postwar 1945-present  
Lesson pack



# Introduction

'British India', also referred to as the 'British Raj' or 'Direct rule in India', was part of the British Empire from 1858 until independence in 1947. This independence process was called 'partition', because the colony was divided up into two countries: India and Pakistan.

Partition was not inevitable and happened because of long and complicated talks between the British government and elite Indian figures, each with their own political interests. The final borders of the new nations were created in only six weeks by Sir Cyril Radcliffe and were based on Muslim and non-Muslim majority areas. Learn more about partition here.

The new Pakistan was split into two regions that were more than 1,000 miles away: West Pakistan and East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh). The distance and difference in culture, language, and identity between the two regions, and the fact that West Pakistan held more political and economic power, led to strong tensions and eventually protest movements in East Pakistan.

In 1971, West and East Pakistan fought in the Bangladesh Liberation War. This led to the creation of Bangladesh on 16 December 1971. How can we trace this road to independence through the British reports in The National Archives?

## Suitable for:

KS 3

## Time period:

Postwar 1945-present

## Connections to the Curriculum:

Key stage 3:

- Challenges for Britain, Europe and the wider world 1901 to the present day
- Indian independence and end of Empire
- Britain's place in the world since 1945

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## Teacher's notes

This lesson looks at how Bangladesh became an independent country after the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. It shows one of the many outcomes of the 1947 Partition of British India, and one of the many independence movements that happened in former British colonies in the 20th century. This topic also sheds light on migration patterns into Britain and the large Bangladeshi community here.

To begin with, students examine a map of the 1947 Partition. This shows how British India was divided into India and Pakistan based on religion, and how far away West and East Pakistan were from each other. It can also show why East Pakistan had a better relationship with India, which was just over the border.

Sources 2a and 2b are related to the Bengali Language Movement, which was an early sign of the tensions between West and East Pakistan. Source 2a is a British report on the moment when Urdu was declared the state language of Pakistan. This excluded the majority of East Pakistanis who did not speak Urdu from official business. It sparked the Bengali Language Movement, in which East Pakistanis protested to get official recognition of Bengali as a state language. Source 2b skips ahead to show the eventual outcome of these protests: a contemporary London monument commemorating those killed in 1952 demonstrations by the police. This movement reflects the formation of a Bengali national identity based on language and culture.

Source 3 is a British report on West Pakistan's response to the cyclone Bhola disaster in November 1970. This disaster is considered the deadliest tropical cyclone ever recorded and killed 300,000-500,000 people in East Pakistan. West Pakistan's lack of any significant response or aid was widely criticised and increased animosity in the East towards the West right before the first general election.

Source 4 is a British report on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's famous speech on 7 March 1971. It shows how tensions were rising due to the Pakistan government refusing to accept Sheikh Mujibur's win.

Sources 5a and 5b reflect on the duration and end of the war from the perspective of

## Teacher's notes

Britain's relationship to Bangladesh. Source 5a shows how the large Bengali diaspora in the UK rallied in support of Bangladesh, eventually resulting in large-scale international attention being brought to the war (see, for example, George Harrison's Concert for Bangladesh). Source 5b describes Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's surprise visit to London after having been imprisoned by West Pakistan during the war. It's useful for students to reflect on why he chose London as his destination.

Sources 6a and 6b look at the British recognition of Bangladesh in February 1972 and the British interests in the conflict. Source 6a is a telegram describing the British financial interests that may be affected by recognition. Students can use this to infer some of the reasons why Britain has been watching the situation so closely. Source 6b shows a letter to the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office from the Embassy of Pakistan, and shows the (West) Pakistan view of the conflict. Students can use these sources to reflect on why a majority of the sources in this lesson have been British reports. How can this be linked to the colonial past of this region?

### Further questions/activities:

- Create a timeline of events leading up to the outbreak of the war, using the sources in this lesson as a guide.
- Learn more about the 1947 Partition using our resources – why did it happen? What were some of the the outcomes?
  - [Partition of British India](#) lesson resource<sup>1</sup>
  - [Indian Independence](#) themed collection<sup>2</sup>
- What voices are not represented in our documents about this conflict? For example, research to learn more about the role of women in the war.
- Look at other former British colonies that achieved independence in the 20th How do their roads to independence compare?

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/partition-of-british-india/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/indian-independence/>

## Teacher's notes

### Sources

1. 1948 Partition Map. Catalogue ref: MFQ 1/1145

2a. Political situation in Pakistan, 1948. Catalogue ref: DO 142/423

2b. Photograph of the Shaheed Minar monument in Altab Ali Park, London. Source: Nicholas Jackson, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Relief assistance for East Pakistan cyclone disaster, November. Catalogue ref: FCO 37/719  
Internal situation: General Election, Dec 1970; uprising in East Pakistan; contingency planning to evacuate UK subjects. Catalogue ref: PREM 15/567

5a. 8 August 1971: Recognise Bangla-Desh Rally in Trafalgar Square. Source: Keystone Press/Alamy

5b. International recognition of Bangladesh, 1971 Jan 01-1972 Dec 31. Catalogue ref: FCO 37/1019

6a. International recognition of Bangladesh, 1971 Jan 01-1972 Dec 31. Catalogue ref: FCO 37/1019

6b. International recognition of Bangladesh, 1972. Catalogue ref: FCO 37/1025

## Background

We can start the story of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War with the poorly planned and tragic 'Partition' of British India in 1947, based on religion. The separate north-eastern and north-western areas of the country, which were mostly Muslim, became a 'united' Pakistan. The rest of the country, mostly non-Muslim, became known as India. (See source 1: MFQ 1/1145.)

West and East Pakistan shared a religion, but not much else. For decades after Partition, the East Pakistanis (present-day Bangladeshis) were treated unfairly by the West Pakistani government over 1,000 miles away. East Pakistan had more people than West Pakistan but got less money and resources from the government. From the early 1950s, the amount of money earned per person in West Pakistan grew three times as much each year compared to East Pakistan.

In 1948, Urdu became the only state language of both West and East Pakistan (see source 2: DO 142/423). It was imposed on millions of Bengali-speaking people. This led to the rise of the Bengali Language Movement, resulting in mass protests and deaths in Dhaka in 1952.

Bengalis have a rich and proud history and culture focused around language, art, food, fashion, community, family and religion. The 1971 Liberation War can be seen as a struggle to preserve and protect this heritage.

A few key events leading up to 1971 sped up the start of the war:

- Cyclone Bhola in November 1970 devastated East Pakistan. Around 3-500,000 people were killed and many more made destitute. Relief efforts from West Pakistan were minimal (see source 3: FCO 37/719).
- Many East Pakistanis were feeling unhappy and resentful. This led to civil disobedience [refusal to obey the government] and the imposition of martial law [temporary rule by the military]. For many, these were uncertain and scary times.
- There was prejudice and violence between Bengalis and Urdu-speaking minorities (Biharis) in early March 1971.

## Background

Maybe the most important event leading up to the war was the 1970 election. The winning Awami League Party was led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who wanted more freedom and independence for East Pakistan. He won the national elections by a clear majority, as East Pakistan had a much larger population than West Pakistan. However, the centralised government in West Pakistan did not accept Rahman as leader. They declared the election results void. This led to the famous and emotional 'Joy Bangla' ('victory to Bengal') speech by Rahman on 7 March 1971 at a rally attended by thousands, in which he declared an 'independent' Bangladesh (see source 4: PREM 15/567). He was later arrested. There were more and more protests by his supporters.

On 25 March 1971, the West Pakistani army invaded East Pakistan, trying to stop these protests. It launched Operation Searchlight, killing many Bengali civilians, intellectuals, students, politicians, and armed forces.

The brutal war that followed lasted for nine months. Estimates for the total number of civilian and military deaths range from 500,000 to over 3 million. Millions of refugees fled to neighbouring India. Groups of Bengali guerrilla fighters ('mukti bahini') and regular soldiers – helped by the Indian military – fought back against the West Pakistani army. West Pakistan eventually surrendered on the 16th of December 1971 (known as 'Victory Day'), leading to the creation of Bangladesh.

You can see how complex the 1971 war was by looking at the many terms used to describe it: Bangladesh War of Independence, Liberation War, genocide, Civil War, or, by many Bangladeshis, 'mukti juddho'/'shongram' (battle and resistance). The war has been immortalised in the symbolism of the national flag of Bangladesh – a dark green background with a red (bloody) circle in the middle.

Britain played an important role in bringing global attention to the war. During 1971, as members of the Commonwealth, many thousands of Bengalis were living and working in Britain. It was a harrowing time for many, as they were living far away and were worried about family and kin in East Pakistan. Foreign journalists were expelled from the region before the suppression started, so there was little international coverage of the events of

## Background

1971 (see Pakistani journalist Anthony Mascarenhas' article 'Genocide' for a rare example). However, Bengalis in the UK raised funds to help the resistance. They organised peaceful campaigns and demonstrations to bring international attention to the war, such as the 'Recognise Bangla-Desh Rally' in Trafalgar Square on 8 August 1971, which drew thousands of people (see source 5a). The British government formally recognised Bangladesh as an independent nation on 4 February in 1972.

Background written by Dr Aminul Hoque MBE (Goldsmiths College, University of London)

## External links

[A parting as of brothers: Bangladesh at 50](#)

Blog from The National Archives looking at Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's surprise visit to London, published to mark the 50th anniversary of Independence Day on 26 March 2021.

[The Bengali East End](#)

The Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives holds historical records from London's Borough of Tower Hamlets. This resource looks at the history of the Bengali community in the area.

[Bangladesh war: The article that changed history](#)

BBC article looking at the legacy of Pakistani journalist Anthony Mascarenhas' article 'Genocide', published in the British Sunday Times on 13 June 1971. It was a rare look inside the beginning of the war and gave it significant international attention.

[The Swadhinata Trust](#)

The Swadhinata Trust is a London-based community group that promotes Bengali history and heritage.

[Bangladesh liberation in photographs](#)

A showcase by the National Portrait Gallery of Yousuf Choudhury's photos of British-

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### [The Swadhinata Trust<sup>4</sup>](#)

The Swadhinata Trust is a London-based community group that promotes Bengali history and heritage.

### [Bangladesh liberation in photographs<sup>5</sup>](#)

A showcase by the National Portrait Gallery of Yousuf Choudhury's photos of British-Bangladeshi demonstrations in 1971, from the book Bangladesh 50 Years.

### [The Concert for Bangladesh, August 1, 1971<sup>6</sup>](#)

Video footage from George Harrison and Ravi Shankar's Concert for Bangladesh in August 1971, reflecting the international attention drawn to the war.

### [The Partition of India: What happened?<sup>7</sup>](#)

A short and education-friendly BBC resource on the 1947 Partition, including a video and maps of West/East Pakistan.

### [Witness History: The Bengali language movement<sup>8</sup>](#)

A BBC 'Witness History' podcast (9 minutes) on the Bengali language movement and the

## External links

1952 deaths.

[The Genocide the U.S. Can't Remember, But Bangladesh Can't Forget](#)<sup>9</sup>

Article in Smithsonian Magazine about the American reactions to the war, drawing on former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's defining it as genocide.

<sup>1</sup> <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a-parting-as-of-brothers-bangladesh-at-50/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ideastore.co.uk/local-history-resources-the-bengali-east-end>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16207201>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.npg.org.uk/visit/inspiring-people-across-the-uk/citizen-uk/tower-hamlets/bangladesh-liberation-in-photographs>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tby39qh9Lts>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/46428985>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3ct1x1w>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/genocide-us-cant-remember-bangladesh-cant-forget-180961490/>

# Tasks

## 1. Partition of British India, 1947

Source 1 shows how British India was divided up after the 1947 Partition: into India (majority non-Muslim) and Pakistan (majority Muslim).

- What do the green areas on the map represent?
- Find East Bengal (later East Pakistan, today's Bangladesh).
- How far away do you think East Bengal is from West Pakistan?
- What kind of issues do you think might come from a country being made up of two areas so far from each other? Give three suggestions.

## 2. The Bengali Language Movement, 1950s

Source 2a describes the moment in 1948 when Urdu was confirmed to be the State language of both West and East Pakistan. This meant that all official business would be done in Urdu.

- Why do you think the leaders of Pakistan thought it was important that everyone spoke the same language? Give three reasons.
- How do you think people in East Pakistan, who did not speak Urdu and instead spoke Bengali (Bangla), reacted to this?
- Find out who Jinnah is. You can use our Indian Independence resource to help.

Source 2b is a photograph of the Shaheed Minar (martyrs' monument) in Altab Ali Park in Whitechapel, London. It is a replica of the same monument in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

- Just by looking at the photo, what do you think this monument commemorates?
- Find out what International Mother Language Day is. How is it linked to this monument?
- This monument is located in Whitechapel, London. Why do you think there is a Shaheed Minar there?

## 3. Cyclone Bhola, 1970

## Tasks

In 1970, the Bhola cyclone struck East Pakistan, killing an estimated 3-500,000 people. This is a British report on how the Pakistan government responded to the disaster.

- Why is the Pakistan government being criticised for how they handled this disaster? Which groups are criticising them?
- Who is the author of this document and what is his view?
- Read the last paragraph of the source. What does the author think will happen because of the cyclone response?

### 4. Escalating tensions, 1970-71

West Pakistan did not accept the 1970 election results (in which the Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, won), leading to escalating protests in East Pakistan. On 7 March 1971, Sheikh Mujibur held a speech, reported on in source 4.

- Look at a video of this speech. What is the atmosphere like when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is giving the speech? How do you think the crowd is feeling?
- Why do you think Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has made the demands listed here?
- What is the tone of this report? How does it compare to the tone of the actual speech in the video?
- This speech is still played on many streets and national events in Bangladesh. Why do you think it resonated with so many Bengalis?

### 5. Reactions to the conflict in Britain, 1971-72

Throughout this lesson, you have been reading texts from the British perspective reporting on events in East and West Pakistan. But why did Britain keep such a close eye on the conflict?

Source 5a is a photograph of the 'Recognise Bangla-Desh Rally' in Trafalgar Square, 8 August 1971.

## Tasks

- What do the banners and sign say?
- What do you think is the aim of the gathering?
- Who do you see in the crowd?
- Why do you think that there is such a large amount of people supporting Bangladesh in London?

Source 5b is a report about Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's surprise appearance in London after being imprisoned by West Pakistan during the war.

- Who imprisoned Sheikh Mujibur Rahman? Why has he been released?
- Why do you think he decided to come to London after his release?
- Sheikh Mujibur Rahman says that the partition between West and East Pakistan should be "a parting as of brothers". What do you think he meant by this?

### 6. Britain's recognition of Bangladesh, 1972

Britain recognised Bangladesh as an independent country on 4 February 1972. There was a lot of internal discussion before this date on the advantages and disadvantages that might come with recognition. Britain wanted to maintain good relationships with both Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Source 6a is a Telegram on the recognition of Bangladesh.

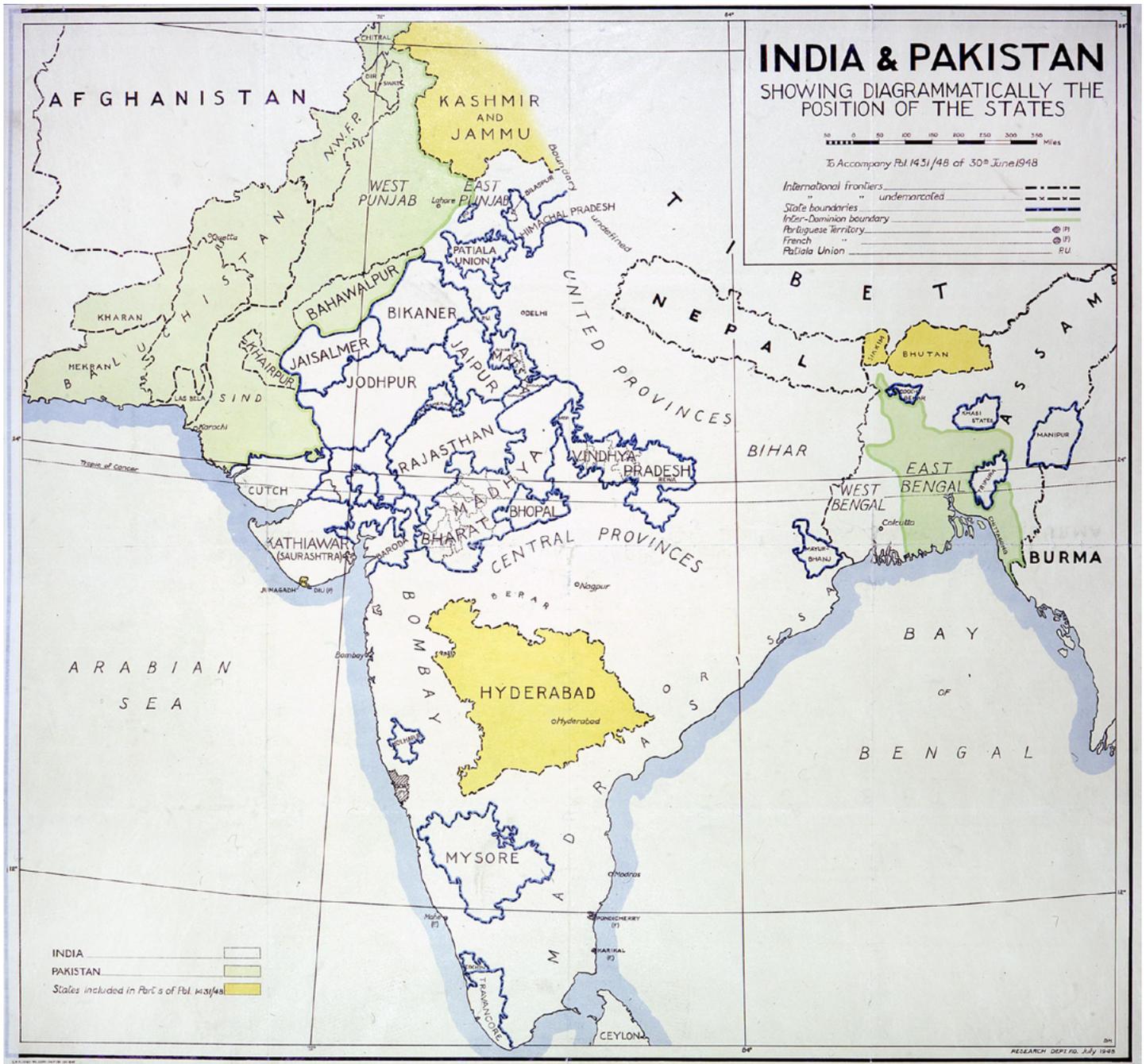
- What type of source do you think this is? Who wrote it?
- Give three reasons for why you think Britain would want to recognise the independence of Bangladesh.
- What does this source reveal about Britain's attitude to the conflict between Pakistan and Bangladesh?
- Why do you think Britain has investments in Pakistan and Bangladesh?
- A word is missing from the source, can you suggest what it might be?
- Why is Britain worried about Eastern European and Communist influence in Bangladesh? (Hint: look at the Cold War.)

## Tasks

Source 6b is a letter from the Embassy of Pakistan to the Foreign & Commonwealth Office.

- What does this extract reveal about relations between
  - Pakistan and Britain?
  - Britain and India?
  - India and Bangladesh?
- What does this document reveal about the attitude of the Pakistan (West Pakistan) government to the independence of Bangladesh?
- Can you explain the meaning of the last line of the document?
- Pakistan left the Commonwealth [an association mostly of former British colonies] in 1972, not re-entering it until 1989. Based on this letter, why do you think it did this?
- What are the UN (United Nations) and the Geneva Convention? Can you find out more about them?

**Source 1: India and Pakistan, showing States, and areas allocated to neither new country, 1948. Catalogue Ref: MFQ 1/1145**



# Transcript: Source 1

INDIA & PAKISTAN

SHOWING DIAGRAMMATICALLY THE POSITION OF THE STATES

To Accompany Pol. 1431/48 of 30th June 1948

International frontiers = [dotted line]

" " undemarcated = [dotted line with x]

State boundaries = [dotted line with blue]

Inter-Dominion boundary = [green line]

Portuguese Territory = [circle with diagonal lines] (P)

French " = [circle with horizontal lines] (F)

Patiala Union = P. U.

INDIA = [white]

PAKISTAN = [green]

States included in Part 5 of Pol. 1431/48 = [yellow]

**Source 2a: Report from the British government on the political situation in Pakistan, March 1948. Catalogue Ref: DO 142/423**

Jinnah received tumultuous welcome on arrival at Dacca airport. Following day he reviewed troops including newly-constituted East Bengal Regiment and said that though East Bengalis were formerly considered a non-martial race, East Bengal was now one of most powerful components of Pakistan in which all would have opportunity to join Army and do their duty to their country.

They were before all else Muslims belonging now to a Muslim nation and essential condition for success of Pakistan was complete internal solidarity;

He confirmed that Urdu must be State language of Pakistan, but that decision regarding Provincial language of East Bengal would be according to will of people.

## Transcript: Source 2a

Jinnah received tumultuous [intense] welcome on arrival at Dacca [capital of Bangladesh] airport. Following day he reviewed troops including newly-constituted [newly created] East Bengal Regiment and said that though East Bengalis were formerly considered a non-martial [non-military] race, East Bengal was now one of the most powerful components of Pakistan in which all would have opportunity to join Army and do their duty to their country.

They were before all else Muslims belonging now to a Muslim nation and essential condition for success of Pakistan was complete internal solidarity... He confirmed that Urdu must be the State language of Pakistan, but that decision regarding Provincial [regional] language of East Bengal would be according to will of people.

**Source 2b: Shaheed Minar (martyrs' monument) in Altab Ali Park in Whitechapel, London. Catalogue Ref: Photo: Nicholas Jackson, CC BY-SA 3.0**



**Source 3: British High Commission in West Pakistan to the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, November 1970. Catalogue Ref: FCO 37/719**

British High Commission,  
RAWALPINDI.

1/51

24 November, 1970.

*Dear Webb,*

Political Aspects of the Cyclone Disaster

Criticism of the Pakistan Government's handling of the relief work after the cyclone is now world-wide news. You might therefore like to have our first impressions of the political aspects of the situation. A more considered report will be in order later.

2. Several East Wing politicians have accused the Central Government of inefficiency and ineffectiveness in bringing relief to the areas affected by the cyclone. Bhashani has been characteristically outspoken, Mujib complained of delays on 22 November, and Professor Ghulam Azam, Amir of the Jama'at-i-Islami in East Pakistan spoke in a similar vein the following day. The only West Wing political leader who has criticised the Government in this way is Wali Khan. (He is now touring the affected areas and should be improving his standing in East Pakistan by so doing). These criticisms are reported in all the Pakistan press, and repeated editorially in the East Wing press. The "Pakistan Observer" has been critical of the Government's relief measures from the very beginning.
3. We have no doubt that such criticisms are justified. The President toured the area on 16 November on his return from Peking. He is going to Dacca today to supervise relief operations, but apart from declaring 20 November as a day of national mourning he has not visibly done anything in between. Officials here in the West Wing have shown us very clearly their attitude to their Bengali compatriots by acting with a notable lack of urgency.
6. In short, quite apart from the appalling human tragedy of it all, the cyclone has hardly been a common problem which has made the country pull together.

Indeed, it has proved to be a practical example of all East Pakistan's complaints against the West. The probable consequences for the "Joy Bangla" vote in East Pakistan, and for the much needed spirit of cooperation in the National Assembly seem clear.

## Transcript: Source 3

British High Commission,

RAWALPINDI.

24 November, 1970.

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4. In short, quite apart from the appalling human tragedy of it all, the cyclone has hardly been a common problem which has made the country pull together. Indeed, it has proved to be a practical example of all East Pakistan's complaints against the West. The probable consequences for the "Joy Bangla" ['Victory to Bengal'] vote in East Pakistan, and for the much needed spirit of cooperation in the National Assembly seem clear.

Source 4: Pakistan situation report from the British government - up to 0930 hours on 8 March 1971. Catalogue Ref: PREM 15/567

PAKISTAN  
- SITUATION REPORT  
(Up to 0930 hours on 8 March)

We now have a fuller account of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech in Dacca on 7 March. We still do not have a text. But it is clear that Mujib has set 5 conditions for his participation in the Assembly Meeting proposed by President Yahya Khan for 25 March. The conditions are:

1. Withdrawal of all troops to barracks
  2. No further firing on civilians;
  3. No further military reinforcement from West Pakistan;
  4. No military interference in the working of Bangla Desh" Government;
  5. Maintenance of law and order to be left exclusively to the Police and Bengali Rifles (East Pakistanis) (A press report mentions also assistance by Awami League Volunteers).
2. Mujib also named an enquiry into "murders" committed in the past week by the military forces. He said his immediate goal was termination of marshall law and the transfer of power to elected representatives. Meanwhile the non-violent, non-co-operation movement must continue. In the coming week this would entail:-
- a. No payment of taxes
  - b. Government offices and Courts to remain closed
  - c. Rail and port workers to cease work if they are used for mobilising forces of repression
  - d. Bengali "radio television, newspapers" not to co-operate in suppressing news of People's Movement"
  - e. Telephones to work only for calls within in East Pakistan
  - f. Banks to make no remittances within West Pakistan
  - g. All buildings to hoist black flags daily and
  - h. Further Hartal to be declared at any moment depending on the situation
  - i. Liberation Committees to be formed in every village under local Awami League leaders.

## Transcript: Source 4

PAKISTAN

SITUATION REPORT

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7. No payment of taxes
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11. Telephone to work only for calls within East Pakistan
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13. All buildings to hoist black flags daily and
14. Further Hartal to be declared at any moment depending on the situation
15. Liberation Committees to be formed in every village under local Awami League leaders.



## Source 5b: WEU Council Meeting notes, 12 January 1972.

Catalogue Ref: FCO 37/1019

CONFIDENTIAL

WEU COUNCIL MEETING: 12 JANUARY 1972

INDIA/PAKISTAN/BANGLA DESH

1. The most significant recent event was President Bhutto's decision to release Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who arrived unexpectedly in London in a special Pakistani aircraft early in the morning of 8 January. Mujib had asked, after his release, either to be sent to Dacca, or to be handed over to the Red Cross or the United Nations, but these suggestions were unacceptable to the Pakistan Government. Mujib in turn refused a Pakistani suggestion that he should go to Tehran and when offered any other destination he chose to come to London.

2. Mujib seemed to have borne up well to the rigours of imprisonment but he was still very tired and disorientated.

However, although he spoke with bitterness of the actions of the Pakistani Army, he showed no rancour towards Bhutto and said he wished to establish good relations with Pakistan. Relations with India would, of course, be much closer, ~~but~~ the ~~new~~ partition should be, in his words, "a parting as of brothers". But first, he said,

Bhutto must acknowledge that the division of Pakistan was a reality.

5. It is clear particularly since the return of Sheikh Mujib to Dacca, that an independent Bangladesh now exists, and that the Bangladesh Government commands the obedience of the majority of the population. Furthermore the decision to release the Sheikh indicates that the Pakistan Government is beginning to reconcile itself to the loss of East Pakistan. The question of recognition is therefore likely to arise in the near future.

## Transcript: Source 5b

WEU COUNCIL MEETING: 12 JANUARY 1972

INDIA/PAKISTAN/BANGLA DESH

1. The most significant recent event was President Bhutto's decision to release Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who arrived unexpectedly in London in a special Pakistani aircraft early in the morning of 8 January. Mujib [Mujibur] had asked, after his release, either to be sent to Dacca, or to be handed over to the Red Cross or the United Nations, but these suggestions were acceptable to the Pakistan Government. Mujib in turn refused a Pakistani suggestion that he should go to Tehran [in Iran] and when offered any other destination he chose to come to London.

2. Mujib seems to have borne up well to the rigours of imprisonment [ put up well with harshness of prison] the but he was still very tired and disoriented. [confused]

However, although he spoke with bitterness of the actions of the Pakistani Army, he showed no rancour [bitterness] towards Bhutto and said he wished to establish good relations with Pakistan. Relations with India would, of course, be much closer. The partition should be, in his words, "a parting of brothers". But first, he said, Bhutto must acknowledge [accept] that the division of Pakistan was a reality.

5. It is clear particularly since the return of Sheikh Mujib to Dacca, that an independent Bangladesh now exists, and that the Bangladesh Government commands the obedience of the majority of the population. Furthermore the decision to release the Shiekh indicates that the Pakistan Government is beginning to reconcile [accept] itself to the loss of East Pakistan. The question of recognition is therefore likely to arise in the near future.

**Source 6a: Telegram on the recognition of Bangladesh, 6 January 1972. Catalogue Ref: FCO 37/1019**

5. ALL THE INDICATIONS SEEM TO ME TO BE IN FAVOUR OF RECOGNITION WHICH IN ITSELF WOULD BE A STABILISING FACTOR AND WOULD GREATLY STRENGTHEN THE HANDS OF THOSE ELEMENTS IN THE GOVT WHO ARE PRO-WEST. THE EASTERN EUROPEANS ARE VERY ACTIVE, AND THE LONGER RECOGNITION BY THE WEST IS DELAYED THE MORE LIKELY IT IS THAT TRADE AND FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS WILL BE MADE WITH THE COMMUNISTS.

6. I APPRECIATE THAT WE HAVE SUBSTANTIAL (? WORD OMITTED) IN PAKISTAN WHICH WE DO NOT WANT TO PUT UNNECESSARILY AT RISK. BUT WE HAVE IMPORTANT INVESTMENT AND TRADING INTERESTS IN BANGLA DESH. THE TEA GARDENS HERE WERE BY FAR OUR MOST VALUABLE ASSET IN UNDIVIDED PAKISTAN. WHILE OBVIOUSLY BANGLA DESH AT PRESENT IS IN NO STATE TO OFFER US A SUBSTANTIAL EXPORT MARKET, OUR MANUFACTURING COMPANIES CAN LOOK FORWARD IN THE FUTURE TO A MODESTLY EXPANDING MARKET WHEREAS THEIR PAKISTAN COUNTERPARTS FACE THE LOSS OF A HITHERTO CAPTIVE MARKET IN THE EAST. MORE IMPORTANT AT PRESENT ARE THE PROSPECTS OF INVISIBLE EARNINGS FROM SHIPPING, JUTE BALING AND MERCHANTING, AND TEA BROKING. BRITISH BANKS ALREADY OPERATED MORE-OR-LESS INDEPENDENTLY IN THE TWO WINGS AND WE KNOW THAT THE AUTHORITIES HERE WISH TO USE LONDON'S BANKING FACILITIES FOR EXTERNAL TRANSACTIONS. THERE IS A DANGER THAT DELAY IN RECOGNITION COULD DIVERT A HIGH PROPORTION OF THESE INVISIBLE EARNINGS TO INDIA. THERE IS ALSO THE FACT THAT BANGLA DESH IS THE LARGER OF THE TWO COUNTRIES IN TERMS OF POPULATION AND THAT IN NORMAL TIMES EARNS JUST AS MUCH FOREIGN EXCHANGE ON VISIBLE EXPORTS.

## Transcript: Source 6a

5. All the indications seem to me to be in favour of recognition of the independence of Bangladesh] which in itself would be a stabilising factor [calm tensions] and would greatly strengthen the hands of those elements in the govt [government] who are pro-West. The Eastern Europeans are very active, and the longer recognition by the West is delayed the more likely it is that trade and financial arrangements will be made with the Communists. [Soviet Union]

6. I appreciate that we have substantial [important] (? word omitted- interests?) in Pakistan which we do not want to put unnecessarily at risk. But we have important investment [money interests] and trading interests in Bangla Desh. The tea gardens here were by far our most valuable asset [possession] in undivided Pakistan. While obviously Bangla Desh at present is in no state to offer us a substantial export market, our manufacturing companies can look forward in the future to a modestly expanding market whereas their Pakistan counterparts face the loss of a hitherto [until now] captive market in the East. More important at present are the prospects of invisible earnings from shipping, jute baling and merchanting [selling], and tea broking. British banks already operated more-or-less independently in the two wings and we know that the authorities here wish to use London's banking facilities for external transactions [business]. There is a danger that delay in recognition could divert [redirect] a high proportion of these invisible earnings to India. There is also the fact that Bangla Desh is the larger of the two countries in terms of population and that in normal times earns just as much foreign exchange on visible exports.

Note: Jute is a fibre that can be spun into thread.

Source 6b: Letter from Embassy of Pakistan to Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 15 February 1972. Catalogue Ref: FCO 37/1025

The Embassy of Pakistan presents its compliments to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and has the honour to state that the Government of Pakistan has noted with profound regret the decision by the British Government to accord recognition to 'Bangla Desh'.

The Government of Pakistan earnestly hopes that the British Government which has recognised 'Bangla Desh' and has expressed its sincere desire to maintain friendly relations with Pakistan should use its good offices and impress upon India the need for the unconditional implementation of UN resolutions in respect of the withdrawal of troops. India should also be called upon to fully comply with the Geneva Convention relating to Prisoners of War and other civilians in Indian hands who should be repatriated to Pakistan without delay. Further, the British Government may consider urging the authorities in Dacca to ensure the safety and security of non-Bengalis and to stop the persecution of Bengalis who subscribed to the concept of a united Pakistan.

The Embassy of Pakistan avails itself of this opportunity to renew to the Foreign & Commonwealth Office the assurances of its highest consideration.

The Foreign & Commonwealth Office,  
Downing Street,  
London, SW1



## Transcript: Source 6b

5. All the indications seem to me to be in favour of recognition of the independence of Bangladesh] which in itself would be a stabilising factor [calm tensions] and would greatly strengthen the hands of those elements in the govt [government] who are pro-West. The Eastern Europeans are very active, and the longer recognition by the West is delayed the more likely it is that trade and financial arrangements will be made with the Communists. [Soviet Union]

6. I appreciate that we have substantial [important] (? word omitted- interests?) in Pakistan which we do not want to put unnecessarily at risk. But we have important investment [money interests] and trading interests in Bangla Desh. The tea gardens here were by far our most valuable asset [possession] in undivided Pakistan. While obviously Bangla Desh at present is in no state to offer us a substantial export market, our manufacturing companies can look forward in the future to a modestly expanding market whereas their Pakistan counterparts face the loss of a hitherto [until now] captive market in the East. More important at present are the prospects of invisible earnings from shipping, jute baling and merchanting [selling], and tea broking. British banks already operated more-or-less independently in the two wings and we know that the authorities here wish to use London's banking facilities for external transactions [business]. There is a danger that delay in recognition could divert [redirect] a high proportion of these invisible earnings to India. There is also the fact that Bangla Desh is the larger of the two countries in terms of population and that in normal times earns just as much foreign exchange on visible exports.

Note: Jute is a fibre that can be spun into thread.



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