

# **A Proposal to Recognize Foreign Nationals As Freedom Fighters of Bangladesh**

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## Table of Index

Background-----	3
Ed Lewis – A Living Example-----	4
The Proposal-----	6
Collection of Nominations-----	7
The Proposed Process of Authentication-----	9
Sustained Activities-----	10
Conclusion-----	11

## Background

*- No war can be fought with bullets only.*

During our liberation war in 1971, there were thousands of foreign nationals who had supported us in many form and fashion. They had raised funds, made posters, flyers, joined in rallies, wrote articles, raised awareness, and sang songs. They also gave shelters and words of comfort to those individuals who had disowned their nationality from Pakistan and had no country to call their own for nine months. These individuals did what they could out of their loves for humanities and had shown their utmost disgust against the inhuman atrocities and genocide against the people of Bangladesh.

Over 30 years has passed by. Bangladesh has gone through many transformations and metamorphosis in its political climate as well as people's mindset. However, we have not been able to recognize those individuals in a national program. There have been some initiatives to identify few individuals who actually were in Bangladesh and fought face to face.

But a war cannot be fought with guns and bullets only.

The support that these individuals provided at that time was invaluable and made tremendous impact in the foreign land supporting our war. These small activities had created ripple effects whatever tiny it was.

This paper is a proposal to recognize those foreign nationals who had helped our mother land when she needed the most.

We, the people of Bangladesh owe this to them.

## Ed Lewis – A Living Example

Edwin C. Lewis III is his full official name. To his friends and coworkers he is known simply as Ed. He is a mechanical engineer by profession. Being in Houston, Texas, he could hardly avoid working for the oil industry. Under a US-AID program, in 1969 summer, he went to Dhaka (Spelled Dacca, East Pakistan at that time) to teach at the Dhaka Polytechnic Institute. The young man instantly fell in love with the people and the land. After a long day's work, when his other American colleagues preferred to lounge in the Intercontinental Hotel, he made his pioneering treks through the streets of Dhaka, with a camera in his hand and bag full of films on his shoulder. He took pictures of the black-smiths, the boatmen, the musician *Monu Mia*, playing his unique one-stringed instrument. He took pictures of the colorful sails on the boats; the streets of Dhaka adorned with color burst of *Krishnachuras*; the boys climbing the tall coconut trees. He stood by the mechanics who worked on the street corners to repair a motorcycle or a piece of machinery. He watched them for hours, he recalls. He admired in amazement how the Bengali people solved this mechanical maze with the minimum of parts, equipment and any documented drawings. While he recognized the people as natural poets and musicians, he grew a genuine respect for their innovative ingenuity and their enormous ability to improvise.

Before going back to Dhaka for the second time in 1970, he looked for someone in Houston to make a Logo that will translate "summer science institute" in Bangla alphabet. That's how he came in contact with a handful of students from East Pakistan, who were at the local University of Houston. Hardly did they all know at that time that it was the beginning of a life long friendship. After his second trip to Dhaka and other parts of the country in the summer of 1970, he had a stark sense of the disparity that existed between the people of two wings of Pakistan. "The warriors and the musicians cannot get along", he commented. The students were invited to his home for traditional Thanksgiving Dinner or to brand the calves in a farm. They became friends.

Later that year (1970), Chittagong was hit by the devastating storm and tidal wave claiming untold number of lives and inflicting sufferings to the survivors. American Newspapers and leading magazines covered this event with horrific pictures and raised the question: Is this the beginning of the end for united Pakistan? The local students at U of H launched a program to raise funds for the relief of the tidal wave victims. Ed Lewis came forward to organize, help and execute these efforts. The students' meager sources and connections were far from adequate to garner such a giant task. With the active help from Ed and his friends, the relief activities were covered in the local media; a local bank offered free service to collect the financial donations from the Houstonians; collection points and warehouses were set up to collect huge amounts of second hand clothing and nearly 500 pounds of emergency medication. The logistics to send these clothing and medication were not trivial. Ed was working hand-in-hand with the volunteers to fumigate, pack and drive the trucks with these items. His dedication and involvement was simply inspirational.

In the first quarter of 1971, history changed in the subcontinent. The democratic process of election was nullified by the Pakistani leadership and the Army and the tyranny of the brutal Pakistani army was unleashed in full fury on March 26<sup>th</sup>. Ed was painfully aware of these events and even could see it coming. The 4-5 students at the University of Houston, who hailed from East Pakistan, were castigated by the majority of the Pakistani community and had to find their own forum and find ways to help the cause of Freedom fighting, the *Mukti Judha*. One of the main focuses was to make the people

of USA be informed about the situation, so that these people could write to their senators and congressmen to support the cause of Bangladesh – even though the republican Nixon-Kissinger administration had a definite Pakistani tilt.

In that effort, the students arranged numerous talk shows, discussion forums and newspaper interviews. The media was a part of the arsenal. And, in those efforts, guess who was involved intimately? It was Ed Lewis. All the pictures that he had shot while he was in Dhaka, proved to be an invaluable source to present the land and the people of Bangladesh to the American communities. Bumper stickers were made by hand-stamped silk prints at Ed's Garage. The Bumper stickers which read: "Victory to Bangladesh", "*Joi Bangla*", "Stop Genocide in Bangladesh", "Pakistan, take off your bloody hands". These stickers boasted the tri-color flag of Bangladesh -- green background and the red circle with the golden map of Bangladesh. The bumper stickers were put on the cars and were distributed to the local population for their support. These efforts continued for months. In those dreary days when the Bengali students officially had no state, when they were threatened to have their passports revoked by the Pakistani embassy, Ed's house became an oasis. He and his family embraced these people and proclaimed their home to be "Bengali home away from home". The banners and picture bear the memories of those tough days.

It is not that Ed alone is a friend of Bangladesh. His family; wife and children, brothers and sisters, uncles and cousins; fiends and families of friends; his colleagues and their families; the minister and members of his church; all became the friends of Bangladesh. Ed Lewis got them involved. They all participated in some form or fashion in those months of *Mukti Judha*. To us, the students who were at UH at that time, who experienced his dedication and participation in the Freedom fight, Ed Lewis is a freedom fighter – a *Mukti Jodha*. The wars are not fought and won only in the battle fields alone. The fights are fought in media over shaping the public opinion, especially in the powerful nations. In that continuous fight for the humanity and freedom, Ed Lewis was an example, a beacon of hope where he did go beyond any call of duty to put his shoulder by the side of a people, whom he happened to come across and then fell in love with.

In 1975, Ed Lewis traveled to Bangladesh with his family to show them the land and the people, he has adopted. He is a grandfather now and still lives in Houston. His grown son and daughter fondly joke about their friends remembering them as the children of a father, who mows lawns in colorful skirts. They were just talking about Ed mowing the lawns in his beloved red and white checkered *lungi*. Ed finds the *lungi* as a very comfortable and practical piece of his wardrobe. Ed Lewis, grandson of a Russian immigrant, values freedom and humanity. We, who know Ed as a friend and a person, can only hope that he and others like him get recognition from the Bangladesh Government for their participation in freedom fight – a task that they did not have to care for at all for that matter, but did it because they wanted to. Ed Lewis should be recognized, simply because he is a *Mukti Jodha*.

## **The Proposal**

This proposal calls for a national program adopted by the Government of Bangladesh. The details of the program and how it can be operated is something that the GOB would know the best.

The following are some suggestions which can be considered as possible means of recognition:

- Inclusion of names in a national database which in turn will be a part of our national history.
- Announcement of names and profiles in national newspapers through Bangladesh Sangbad Sangshata (BSS).
- Presentation of a certificate, presented by the honorable President or honorable Prime Minister.
- A paid for trip to Bangladesh with a guided tour to the national monument in Savar.
- Invitation to attend as special guest in all national programs during the victory day celebrations every year.

## **Collection of Nominations**

It would be quite impossible to collect names of such individuals for the government officials located in Bangladesh. That is where the non resident Bangladeshis (NRB) can play a vital role. The following are some suggested method how names of such candidates can be collected.

### **Local Organizations**

Almost every major city has some form of Bangladeshi organizations. Some of these organizations are very well organized. and some are loosely organized. If these organizations are properly approached, they can play an important role in identifying any potential candidate.

### **Web Site**

Website could be the most effective vehicle to convey the message around the world and could become the launching station of such initiative. It is the most cost effective solution and it can reach millions of people in matter of days. A website can be launched with all relevant information and online submission of candidates.

### **E-Mail Forums**

There are numerous e-mail forums and some of them have more than 10,000 members. Through these forums names of candidates can be collected.

### **Research**

Bangladesh Association will conduct its own research to identify candidates. This research will be carried out by the members of the organization on a personal level.

### **News Agencies**

During our liberation war there were many reporters who stayed in Bangladesh, wrote articles and took photographs. These pictures and articles played important role in shaping the world opinion in our favor. By contacting news agencies formally, many of these names could be collected.

### **Personal Recollections**

Once the word will be spread around the NRBs, many will come forward with their personal recollection.

### **Regional Bangladeshi News papers and magazines**

There are numerous Bangla newspapers and magazines. By placing regular advertisements information about this initiatives can be spread.

**National Programs (such as FOBANA, Bangla Sammelon)**

Events like FOBANA, bangle Sammelon could be possible venues where information about this initiative be promoted. Names of candidates can be collected from such venues.

## **The Proposed Process of Authentication**

A very strict selection and authentication process has to be in place to sort through these names. A panel of independent judges can be formed who will oversee the whole process to make sure that all claims are investigated properly, documents are tested for authentication and the process is politically unbiased.

Following are some possible method that can be implemented to authenticate the claims. Obviously this process will be matured as the initiatives takes shape for reality.

### **Step 1**

A detailed nomination form will be filled up. This form will be used as the primary ballot, therefore any wrong information in this ballot will disqualify the candidate. A printable version and an online version of this form will be available on the web site so that anyone can download it.

This form will be accompanied with the proofs of the claim. For instance, a copy of the article, photograph, notarized statement from witnesses, video tapes, news paper clipping etc.

### **Step 2**

All ballots will be placed in one pool. Then according to the location of the candidates, independent volunteers will be assigned to verify the authenticity of the claim.

A thank you letter will be sent out immediately just for being a nominee. This will add a lot of prestige to the initiative.

### **Step 3**

Once the investigation is complete, the complete report along with the original ballot will be placed in a file. The independent panel of judges will sit once in a quarter (3 months) to go over the files and give their judgment.

### **Step 4**

If further investigation is needed, the investigator will be notified. Otherwise, the recommendation of the judges will be sent to the Board of Directors of Bangladesh Association so that the list of selected names can be sent to the Government of Bangladesh.

### **Step 5**

Government of Bangladesh may conduct their own investigation through the embassies or ask further questions to the judges for clarification. Finally the list will be published by the Government of Bangladesh.

## **Sustained Activities**

This initiative will have some cost involved. Initially this cost will be paid by Bangladesh Association, Houston. However, if the project becomes too cumbersome to manage, then some cost may need to be shared by other organization. This cost could be for the investigating the claims or paying for the archived materials.

The website hosting, design and maintenance will be organized by the volunteer of Bangladesh Association, Houston.

Board of Directors of Bangladesh Association, Houston will select the panel members. Qualifications of the panel members will be set forth by the Association and no collaborators of 1971 war of independence will be allowed to take part of this initiative.

## **Conclusion**

This is a noble effort and it is our moral obligation to make this happen in our life time. We owe this to our country and to our next generation. We, as a nation can not sit idle and expect someone else will do this for us. It is our job and we must do it.