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REFUGEE JOURNEYS

HISTORIES OF RESETTLEMENT, REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE

EDITED BY JORDANA SILVERSTEIN AND RACHEL STEVENS



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5

THE OTHER ASIAN REFUGEES IN THE 1970s

Australian responses to the Bangladeshi[1] refugee crisis in 1971

Rachel Stevens[2]

If I was to ask you to imagine Asian refugees in the 1970s, what images would spring to mind? I suspect you would think of Vietnamese refugees, either on a boat drifting in the South China Sea or perhaps in an overcrowded camp in Malaysia. These are iconic images of Asian refugees in the 1970s and with little wonder. The Vietnamese exodus was dramatic, sudden and was the result of Western, primarily American, military intervention in the region. Furthermore, with the resettlement of over 1.4 million Indochinese (Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian) refugees throughout Western countries from April 1975 to 1991, these South-East Asian migrants have had a visible impact on cities across North America, Western Europe and Australia.[3] If not the Vietnamese

1 At the time of the conflict, Bangladesh was known as East Pakistan. I will use the contemporary term 'Bangladesh', unless quoting directly from archival material or discussing the history of the region.

2 This research was generously supported by a National Library of Australia Fellowship, funded by the Past and Present members of the National Library Council in 2018.

3 Rachel Stevens, *Immigration Policy from 1970 to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2016): 108; Seamus O'Hanlon and Rachel Stevens, 'A Nation of Immigrants or a Nation of Immigrant Cities? The Urban Context of Australian Multiculturalism', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* (hereafter *AJPH*) 63, no. 4 (2017): 556–71, doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12403.

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refugees, then perhaps you thought of Ugandan Asians, the 27,200 ethnic Gujaratis who were forcibly expelled by Ugandan President Idi Amin as part of his government's 'Africanisation' strategy in 1972–73.[4]

The resettlement of Indochinese refugees, mostly in North America, Australia and France, and the arrival of Ugandan Asians in Britain and other countries were significant events in recent refugee history. Not surprisingly, these two refugee movements have attracted considerable scholarly attention.[5] But in terms of numbers, these refugee populations were dwarfed by the 10 million Bangladeshi refugees who fled to India to escape violence in their home country. Largely forgotten in public memory outside of South Asian communities, the Bangladesh refugee crisis of 1971 received saturation worldwide media coverage at the time and attracted extensive humanitarian relief from governments, aid agencies, the United Nations and religious organisations.

This chapter aims to extend the conventional narrative of Asian refugees during the 1970s to include Bangladeshi refugees. Specifically, it explores the ways that Australians of diverse backgrounds engaged with the unfolding refugee crisis in 1971 and examines how they sought to provide humanitarian relief to the millions of Bengali refugees languishing in camps in India. It asks: Who were the Australians that empathised with the plight of Bangladeshi refugees? And why did they care for distant Asian refugees, many of whom were non-Christians and with socialist leanings? The efforts of Australians to aid Bangladeshi refugees is perplexing: during the second half of the twentieth century, the Australian Government traditionally gave preference to the resettlement of European anti-communist refugees and, later, South-East Asian refugees over

4 Samia Nasar, 'We Refugees? Re-defining Britain's East African Asians', in *Migrant Britain. Histories and Historiographies: Essays in Honour of Colin Holmes*, eds Jennifer Craig-Norton, Christhard Hoffmann and Tony Kushner (London: Routledge, 2018): 138–48, doi.org/10.4324/9781315159959-16, and Panikos Panayi, ed., *The Impact of Immigration: A Documentary History of the Effects and Experiences of Immigrants in Britain Since 1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

5 For recent scholarship of Vietnamese refugees, see the voluminous work of Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen; for recent publications on the resettlement of Ugandan Asians in Britain, see Becky Taylor, 'Good Citizens? Ugandan Asians, Volunteers and "Race" Relation in 1970s Britain', *History Workshop Journal* 85, no. 1 (2018): 120–41, doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbx055; Yumiko Hamai, '"Imperial Burden" or "Jews of Africa?" An Analysis of Political and Media Discourse in the Ugandan Asian Crisis (1972)', *Twentieth Century British History* 22, no. 3 (2011): 415–36, doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwq059.

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other persecuted groups.[6] These were the exiles with whom Australians sympathised. We shared their struggle against communism and the tyranny of authoritarian dictatorships. But the Bangladeshi refugees did not fit this typical mould and the cross-sectional support they received from the Australian public is, prima facie, counterintuitive.

Two Pakistans, many problems: A brief history to the 1971 conflict

The Islamic State of Pakistan emerged from the Partition of British India in 1947. Its two wings, West Pakistan (current-day Pakistan) and East Pakistan (Bangladesh), were over 1,200 miles apart. These territories were hastily devised by Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a London judge, in under six weeks. This Partition line, which is now known as the Radcliffe line, cut through 450,000 km² and affected the lives of 88 million people. The idea behind the Partition was to separate Muslim-majority areas from Hindu-majority areas, but given the religious diversity in the northern parts of India, this task was not as simple as it sounded. West Pakistan had sizeable Sikh and Hindu populations around the Punjab while in East Pakistan, around 16 per cent of the population was Hindu.

Although the created state of Pakistan was conceived on the assumption of Muslim solidarity, ethnic and linguistic differences between the two wings created frequent instability within the fledgling nation. In Pakistan, the government bestowed official status on English and Urdu, the latter considered the language of Islam in South Asia. Neither official language, however, was widely spoken. According to the 1961 Pakistani census (the most relevant census for the 1971 war), 99 per cent of East Pakistanis spoke Bengali. Meanwhile, two-thirds of West Pakistanis spoke Punjabi, the remainder speaking Urdu, Sindhi or Pashto. Given the dominance of Bengali in East Pakistan, East Pakistanis had long agitated unsuccessfully for official language recognition. The failure of the Pakistani Government to recognise Bengali as an official language was an affront to the rich literary tradition among Bengalis.

6 For histories of Australian resettlement of central and eastern European refugees, see Jayne Persian's *Beautiful Balts: From Displaced Persons to New Australians* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2017) and Vasilios Vasilas, *When Freedom Beckons: The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the Jewish Hungarian Journey to Australia* (Sydney: Vasilios Vasilas, 2017).

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Even the idea of Muslim solidarity overcoming all other differences proved to be a myth in Pakistan. West Pakistani elites believed that, even though East Pakistanis had Muslim names and identified as Muslim, they were in fact 'Hindu at heart'. West Pakistani elites also saw Bengalis as uncivilised and effeminate. As one West Pakistani commander commented, East Bengal was 'a low-lying land of low-lying people'.[7] The idea that Bengalis were weaker than West Pakistanis had long colonial roots, fostered by the British when they recruited most of the military from the Punjab, the north-western province of British India. Punjabis believed that, as the selected military caste, they were racially superior to other ethnic groups in British India. This belief held through the postcolonial years, with most of the armed forces recruited from West Pakistan. These racial stereotypes, a fear of foreign Hindu influence and linguistic differences rendered East Pakistanis outsiders and 'strangers in their own land', which in turn provided fertile ground for the mass killings that would follow in 1971.[8]

West Pakistani chauvinism arguably enabled the central government to treat its eastern province as a colony and a market, ripe for exploitation.[9] Despite being the more populous province with 76 million people, and the main supplier of income to the national economy through exports of jute and rice, East Pakistanis were deprived of enjoying the fruits of their labour. Government revenue, development projects and foreign aid expenditure were all directed to West Pakistan. West Pakistanis also had access to well-paid government jobs: Islamabad became the national capital in 1967 and home to the civil service; the Pakistan Armed Forces were headquartered in neighbouring Rawalpindi. With this relative prosperity, 75 per cent of all imports to Pakistan were shipped to the western province while East Pakistanis endured endemic poverty punctuated with regular natural disasters. Two such disasters hit East Pakistan in 1970 and exacerbated ill will between the two provinces. The monsoonal floods in July were followed by a cyclone and tidal bore in December. Collectively, hundreds of thousands perished. While international aid poured in, the central government in Islamabad was slow to act and indifferent to the suffering of East Pakistanis.

7 Donald Beachler, 'The Politics of Genocide Scholarship: The Case of Bangladesh', *Patterns of Prejudice* 41, no. 5 (2007): 467–92, 477–78, doi.org/10.1080/00313220701657286.

8 Yasmin Saikia, 'Insāniyat for Peace: Survivors' narrative of the 1971 war of Bangladesh', *Journal of Genocide Research* 13, no. 4 (2011): 475–501, 486, doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2011.625739.

9 Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2013).

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Pakistan held its first democratic elections in 1970. As a watershed moment for a country plagued by corruption and dictatorships in its short history, a sense of optimism filled the air. However, the elections did not go to plan, at least from the perspective of the ruling elite in West Pakistan. Pro-autonomy East Pakistani party, the Awami League, won an absolute majority of the seats out of the newly formed 313-seat national assembly, including 167 out of 169 seats allocated to East Pakistan. With its absolute majority, the Awami League could enact its autonomy program and install its leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, as the prime minister of Pakistan. Of course, the prospect of relinquishing power to a Bengali was unacceptable to the ruling class in West Pakistan. Unwilling to forego power, Pakistan's military dictator Yahya Khan delayed convening the new assembly, which in turn, triggered mass outrage in East Pakistan as Bengalis believed they had been robbed of their electoral victory. Mass protests and strikes soon followed, paralysing the East Pakistani economy.

At midnight on 25 March 1971, the West Pakistani armed forces invaded East Pakistan under the cover of darkness. Their aim was to quash the uprising through brute force and, while they were there, to '[teach] them [Bengalis] a lesson'.[10] In practice, this meant burning villages, destroying crops, capturing and raping of hundreds of thousands of women, and killing agitators, namely, students, intellectuals, Awami League activists and, most of all, Hindus. Approximately 80,000 West Pakistani troops entered East Pakistan, followed by an additional 100,000 paramilitary and civilian armed forces. The West Pakistani forces, however, were met by 175,000 East Pakistani guerrillas who were supported, materially and morally, by India. When India intervened directly in the war in December 1971 – for strategic, political and humanitarian reasons – they deployed 250,000 troops on two fronts. Simply out-powered and overrun, West Pakistan surrendered and East Pakistanis declared their independence, adopting the name Bangla Desh (Land of Bengal).

This brief, peripheral conflict left destruction on an unimaginable scale: the deaths of 1.5 million by conservative estimates; 3 million by Bangladeshi estimates. To escape widespread and indiscriminate violence,

10 Quotation is from British High Commissioner to Pakistan, Cyril Pickard, in 1971. See Angela Debnath, 'British Perceptions of the East Pakistan Crisis 1971: "Hideous Atrocities on Both Sides"', *Journal of Genocide Research* 13, no. 4 (2011): 421–50, 428, doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2011.625744, and Simon C Smith, 'Coming Down on the Winning Side: Britain on the South Asia Crisis, 1971', *Contemporary British History* 24, no. 4 (2010): 451–70, 456, doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2010.518410.

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millions of East Pakistanis fled for their lives. By the end of the conflict, 10 million refugees were living in camps in India, specifically in West Bengal. There were a further 20 million Bengalis internally displaced within East Pakistan. These statistics are all the more staggering when one considers that the East Pakistani population was 76 million at the time. With 30 million internally displaced or refugees in India, nearly two in five East Pakistanis were uprooted during their war of liberation from Pakistan. The mass killings during the 1971 war have been deemed by some researchers as constituting genocide, and the Bangladeshi Government explicitly promotes this view. However, other scholars argue that the violence was multidirectional and opportunistic, and that there was no systematic attempt to exterminate a race of people. Putting this debate to one side, there is a consensus that the armed forces and militia inflicted widespread suffering on civilians: in the words of one Bihari woman, 1971 was 'the year of anarchy and end of humanity in Bangladesh'.[11]

International involvement and scholarly silence

Given the scale and regional significance of the Bangladesh War of Liberation and ensuing refugee exodus, one may assume that historians, anthropologists, political scientists and/or sociologists have extensively documented and analysed this event. However, this is not the case. To be sure, archival materials are difficult to access: government documents in Bangladesh were destroyed by the Pakistani armed forces in the final days of the conflict; Pakistani government archives on this topic remain closed.[12] Feminist South Asian scholars based in the West have highlighted the

11 Quotation comes from Christian Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010), chapter 4, doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511781254. For scholarly debate on the extent and nature of violence during the 1971 war, see Beachler, 'The Politics of Genocide Scholarship'; A Dirk Moses, 'The United Nations, Humanitarianism and Human Rights: War Crimes/Genocide Trials for Pakistani Soldiers in 1971', in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman (New York: Cambridge University Press 2011): 258–80, doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511921667.017; Wardatul Akmam, 'Atrocities against Humanity During the Liberation War in Bangladesh: A Case of Genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research* 4, no. 4 (2002): 543–59, doi.org/10.1080/146235022000000463; Sarmila Bose, 'The Question of Genocide and the Quest for Justice in the 1971 War', *Journal of Genocide Research* 13, no. 4 (2011): 393–419, doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2011.625750, and her generalist book, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (London: Hurst Publishers 2011).

12 Raghavan, *1971*, 11.

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gendered nature of violence during the conflict. Through interviews with survivors and perpetrators of sexual violence in Bangladesh, researchers including Bina D'Costa and Yasmin Saikia have provided a voice to civilians normally rendered silent.[13]

There is scant research on the actions of international actors during this conflict. What limited scholarship there is, is typically top-down and government-oriented, examining foreign policy cables, speeches and government action or inaction, or media portrayals. Drawing on recently declassified government archives, scholars have considered the responses of the governments of the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and India to the crisis.[14] However, this focus on state actors does not match my own reading of events in which Australians of a variety of backgrounds mobilised, lobbied and fundraised to provide aid for Bangladeshi refugees despite government indifference to the calamity.

In this chapter, I make three main arguments. First, grassroots activism was a significant force in shaping government policy. Throughout 1971, there was a schism between community attitudes in favour of humanitarian intervention and Australian Government policy to remain neutral, avoid interfering in an internal Pakistani matter and donate as little money as possible to generate positive publicity for the government. During the refugee crisis, the Australian Government provided cash and in-kind aid to Bangladeshi refugees gradually, only increasing the donated amount in response to public pressure. In terms of refugee relief, resettlement in Australia was never an option; the Indian Government that temporarily settled the 10 million refugees needed cash to buy materials for shelter, food and medical care. In the end, the Australian Government became a leading donor nation, a fact even more remarkable given the small population base of 12 million people in 1971. By the end of February 1972, the Australian Government had provided US$5,055,072,

13 Bina D'Costa, *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia* (London: Routledge, 2010); Yasmin Saikia, 'Beyond the Archive of Silence: Narratives of Violence of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh', *History Workshop Journal* 58, no. 1 (2004): 275–87, doi.org/10.1093/hwj/58.1.275.

14 Gary J Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013); Raghavan, *1971*; Richard Pilkington, 'In the National Interest? Canada and the East Pakistan Crisis of 1971', *Journal of Genocide Research* 13, no. 4 (2011): 451–74, doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2011.625741; Debnath, 'British Perceptions of the East Pakistan Crisis'; Janice Musson, 'Britain and the Recognition of Bangladesh in 1972', *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 19, no. 1 (2008): 125–44, doi.org/10.1080/09592290801913767; Sonia Cordera, 'India's Response to the 1971 East Pakistan Crisis: Hidden and Open Reasons for Intervention', *Journal of Genocide Research* 17, no. 1 (2015): 45–62, doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2015.991207.

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a figure only exceeded by Scandinavian/northern European nations, the Netherlands (US$5,754,247), Sweden (US$6,000,584), West Germany (US$19,771,298), and major powers, the USSR (US$20,000,000), the UK (US$38,182,132) and the US (US$89,157,000).[15] But substantial Australian Government aid may well have never happened had it not been for public activism.

Second, the Bangladeshi refugee crisis in 1971 created a coalition of disparate groups from a cross-section of Australian society who otherwise had little in common. Unlike many other social causes, aid to Bangladeshi refugees had broad appeal to the right and the left. It appealed to left-wingers who abhorred West Pakistan's seemingly colonial policies towards its eastern wing, pacifists shocked by the wanton violence and mass killings, Christians who sought to remedy Third World poverty and inequality, and internationalists who wanted Australia to play a leading role in world affairs, especially in Asia. Importantly, due to saturation media coverage in 1971, this conflict and refugee exodus galvanised ostensibly apolitical citizens into action. This conflict was easy to understand, its villains and victims easy to identify. The imagery of starving refugees on TV and in the newspaper was evocative; the statistics of up to 3 million deaths, 10 million refugees and a further 20 million internally displaced, for a region of 76 million people, were difficult to comprehend but impossible to ignore. This refugee crisis appealed to Australians' morality and humanity, regardless of political affiliation, religion, profession, age or class.

Third, Australian involvement in the Bangladesh Liberation War was significant because it demonstrated a deep and multifocal engagement with Bengal, a region not usually associated with Australian foreign policies, whether in relation to defence or development. When we think of Australia's engagement with Asia, particularly since 1945, we may reasonably think of military action in Japan, Korea or Indochina, humanitarian efforts in South-East Asia, the complicated relationships

15 Offers of Assistance Made By/Received from Foreign Governments up to 24-2-1972, Contributions from governments to the Focal Point – General File, Series 1, Classified Subject Files, Fonds 11, Records of the Central Registry, Archives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Geneva.

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with Indonesia and mainland China or colonial endeavours in the Pacific.[16] In short, Australians look north. Maybe it is time Australians look north-west.

There are a number of distinct groups of Australians who were active in providing aid and relief to Bangladeshi refugees, such as political activists (including students), humanitarian organisations, Christian groups and Australian diplomats stationed in the region. In this chapter, I will focus on the actions of two groups: diplomats (or public servants) and Christians. Due to word restrictions, it would be too ambitious to include a discussion on humanitarian groups and political activists, and therefore these two populations will be the subject of future publications. I have classified individuals and organisations according to their overarching affiliation and the values that inform their activities. However, the distinctions between the four groups are not perfect and there are occasions of overlap, for example, in the case of Christian student activists. Furthermore, the demarcation between each of these groups does not intend to obscure the links between them. On the contrary, the evidence indicates that individual actors during this event did not operate in a vacuum; rather, they were part of, and impacted by, larger networks.

The diplomats

The National Library of Australia holds a number of transcribed oral histories of career diplomats, the public servants who spent most of their professional lives stationed at various embassies abroad who offer fascinating firsthand accounts as they witnessed major events in world history. These oral histories are supplemented with the memoirs and

16 For recent Australian scholarship on histories of humanitarianism in Asia, Agnieszka Sobocinska, 'A New Kind of Mission: The Volunteer Graduate Scheme and the History of International Development', *AJPH* 62, no. 3 (2016): 369–87, doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12268; Joy Damousi, 'The Campaign for Japanese-Australian Children to Enter Australia, 1957–1968: A History of Post-War Humanitarianism', *AJPH* 64, no. 2 (2018): 211–26, doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12461; on relations with Indonesia and China, see Peter van der Eng, '*Konfrontasi* and Australia's Aid to Indonesia during the 1960s', *AJPH* 55, no. 1 (2009): 46-63; Billy Griffiths, *The China Breakthrough: Whitlam in the Middle Kingdom, 1971* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing 2012); on histories of development, see Nicholas Ferns, '"A New Hope for Asia?" Australia, the United States and the Promotion of Economic Development in Southeast Asia', *AJPH* 64, no. 1 (2018): 33–47, doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12422; on histories of colonial involvement in the Pacific, see Stephen Henningham, 'Australia's Economic Ambitions in French New Caledonia, 1945–1955', *Journal of Pacific History* 49, no. 4 (2014): 421–39, doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2014.976915; Bruce Hunt, *Australia's Northern Shield: Papua New Guinea and the Defence of Australia since 1880* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2017).

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research papers of the diplomats, some of which were self-published and are unlikely to be held at other libraries. In this section, I will focus on three key diplomats: Francis Stuart, the Australian high commissioner to Pakistan, based in Islamabad, West Pakistan; Jim Allen, deputy high commissioner to Pakistan, based in Dhaka, Bangladesh; and Sir Keith Waller, who was secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs from 1970 to 1974.[17] All three public servants played a significant part in liaising between the William McMahon Government, UN agencies and the Indian and Pakistani governments. But that is where the similarities end between the three individuals.

Jim Allen

James Lawrence Allen, known as Jim Allen, was definitely not a typical Australian diplomat.[18] Born in north-east India to Australian, missionary Methodist parents, the first language he spoke was Urdu. As a child, Jim's parents would ask him questions in English and he would reply in Urdu. During his adolescence, Jim attended boarding school in Adelaide, then studied at the University of Adelaide, graduating with honours in classics. As a new graduate, Jim dreamed of joining the Indian Civil Service. He travelled to London to sit the civil service exam but just fell short of acceptance into the highly esteemed Indian Civil Service. Bitterly disappointed that he could not realise his lifelong dream, Jim returned to West Bengal and worked as an English lecturer before enlisting in the British Imperial Forces to fight in World War II.

After the war, Jim worked briefly with Lord Richard Casey, the Australian who served the British Empire as governor of Bengal from 1944 to 1946. Jim joined the Australian High Commission in New Delhi as third secretary, becoming a permanent member of the Australian Foreign Service in 1946. During this time, he witnessed firsthand the tumultuous Partition of India and the creation of Pakistan, an event that unleashed communal and sectarian violence on an unprecedented scale.

17 Unless it is a direct quotation, I will use the indigenous spelling of 'Dhaka' rather than the Anglicised spelling 'Dacca' throughout this chapter.

18 The following discussion is based on: 'James Allen interviewed by Mel Pratt for the Mel Pratt Collection [sound recording]', 1976, typed transcript, National Library of Australia (NLA), ORAL TRC 121/76, available at: nla.gov.au/nla.obj-214917676.

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Allen was posted to Dhaka as deputy high commissioner in 1969, a post he held for five years. Importantly, Allen had a native's proficiency in Bengali. While other diplomats in Dhaka took crash courses in Bengali, they could not shake their foreign accent. Because Allen's mother tongue was Urdu, this helped him gain fluency in another Indo-Aryan language, Bengali. While stationed in Bangladesh, Allen mingled with peasants and workers throughout the countryside with ease. He could also make jokes in Bengali – a true indicator of fluency – which made him very popular with the locals. Because of this, Allen was widely admired and respected throughout Bangladesh, a fact that gave the Australian Government enormous kudos as Bangladesh emerged as an independent state.

In his oral history interview, Allen recalled the beginning of hostilities in Bangladesh:

> On the night of Thursday the 25th March Pakistani forces surged out of their Cantonments in all the major industrial/urban centres and started machine gunning anybody in sight – students in particular, polices, people on duty, shopkeepers … that went on for a few days in the urban centres, and of course all Bengalis fled into the countryside. Then the army fanned out into the countryside and continued this massacre in the villages … 1971 was a very sad and unhappy year.
>
> There was a tremendous amount of cruelty and inhumanity going on all over the country … Quite frankly I had difficulty in getting the message across to Canberra. At the working level, I had the feeling there was a strong continuing pro-Pakistan bias, matched by an equally strong continuing anti-Indian bias. I had the feeling that some of my criticisms of what the Pakistan Army and the Pakistan Government was doing in East Pakistan were not all that welcome back in Canberra, at any rate on the working level.

What we have here are contesting interpretations over the conflict, its causes and how to respond. Jim Allen persevered with relaying his message to his superiors in Canberra, and with the backing of UN observers and other third parties, his perspective eventually gained traction. As Allen recalled 'my story, told from the point of view of the Bengali people, finally prevailed'.[19]

19 Ibid., 10–11.

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Despite wanton violence, Allen and his wife Marion 'bravely stuck it out' in Bangladesh, choosing not to relocate to safer surrounds.[20] The Allens were very active in relief efforts for refugees and internally displaced persons, providing food, shelter and clothing for refugees in the countryside, and later providing rehabilitation work for widows destitute after the war. Interestingly, these relief efforts were funded privately from friends and acquaintances back in Australia, independent of his work for the Australian Government. Jim Allen also liaised closely with aid agencies in Australia as well as Australian Baptist missionaries in Bengal, which will be discussed later in the chapter.[21]

Francis Stuart

Francis Stuart was the Australian high commissioner to Pakistan, as well as Afghanistan, from 1970 to 1973. He was based in Islamabad, West Pakistan, some distance from his deputy, Jim Allen, in Dhaka. The two diplomats provide a clear contrast: while Allen had spent much of his life in South Asia immersed in the local cultures, Stuart had been a career diplomat and globetrotter, and had been posted in diverse countries such as Cambodia, the Philippines, the United Arab Republic (the brief union of Syria and Egypt) and Poland. Allen and Stuart also understood the conflict in Bangladesh differently. Allen was sympathetic to the view of Bengalis and admired Indian humanitarian efforts during the refugee crisis. Stuart, on the other hand, was unabashedly pro–West Pakistan and anti-Indian. During the conflict, Stuart communicated to the Australian Government that the ongoing conflict was a 'civil war and not a war of independence against alien rule'.[22] The conflict-as-civil-war perspective of Stuart influenced Australian Government policy at first. However, the Australian Government would revise its policy and rhetoric by October 1971 in response to the public outcry at West Pakistani atrocities, and arguably, the persuasiveness of Jim Allen.

While Jim and Marion Allen were working tirelessly to help the internally displaced in the countryside of Bangladesh, Stuart was frustrated by communication difficulties. He wrote in his memoir that:

20 Francis Stuart, *Towards Coming of Ages. A Foreign Service Odyssey*, Australians in Asia Series, March 1989 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 1989), 230.

21 J L Allen to Moira Lenore Dynon, Letter 1972 [manuscript], 1972. NLA MS 3118.

22 Stuart, *Towards Coming of Ages*, 230.

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> Most of the time the telex network was overloaded or closed down, or the Pakistani authorities refused to transmit messages in code. At times, we were isolated except for messages carried through the Khyber Pass to or from Kabul.[23]

Isolated from communication and distant from the theatre of war, Stuart became focused on how the Indian Government, he believed, was using the crisis to shift the balance of power in the region in the pursuit of Indian hegemony. This focus arguably became an obsession at the expense of other issues, particularly humanitarian. What is striking about Stuart's writings is that he seemed removed from what was going on in Bengal and also Australia, completely misreading public sentiment. In a condescending tone, Stuart wrote that the Australian public:

> Could not be expected to interest itself in the 1971 affair. To the extent it followed things at all it [the Australian public] saw the Bangladesh conflict in black and white terms, as the suppression of a nationalist struggle for freedom against an imperialist military dictatorship.[24]

Stuart also commented that 'the Australian view of the situation as a liberation struggle against colonialism was simplistic, even puerile'. Out of touch with public activism and humanitarian endeavours in Australia, Stuart appears oblivious to the multitude of Australian responses to the Bangladeshi refugee crisis. Stuart also extended his dismissiveness to Prime Minister William McMahon, who he deemed a political opportunist who deliberately harnessed a foreign crisis to further his domestic political goals. This cynical depiction of McMahon may well have been true but the prime minister was certainly not the first nor the last politician to leverage external events for political gain.

In short, the high commissioner for Pakistan, Francis Stuart, and his deputy, Jim Allen, held diametrically opposing views, an issue perhaps exacerbated by their distance of over 2,000 km. It was up to the secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Sir Keith Waller, to make sense of the conflicting information and pass on recommendations to Australia's then novice foreign minister, Nigel Bowen.

23 Ibid., 234.
24 Ibid., 240.

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Sir Keith Waller

Secretary from 1970 to 1974, Waller shared Stuart's pro-Pakistan bias, commenting in his memoirs that the Australian Government had been traditionally wary of the Indian Government since the time of Menzies. Despite general apprehension about Hindus, Waller noted that, traditionally, the Australian Government had good relations with Bengal, both the eastern part in Pakistan and the western part in India, dating back to when Australian Lord Casey was governor of Bengal as well as the longstanding involvement of Australian Baptist missionaries in the region.[25]

Sir Keith was very close to Lord Casey, who remained active in foreign policy circles until his death in 1976. They would often converse over the phone during this period. Given Casey's experience in Bengal, Waller leant on him for advice on the ensuing crisis in South Asia. Importantly, Lord Casey respected Jim Allen, describing Allen as 'remarkably well fitted for his difficult task' of deputy high commissioner in Dhaka.[26] It is hard to say with any certainty, but the close relationships between Allen and Casey, and between Casey and Waller, meant that Jim Allen's position trumped the arguments of his superior, Francis Stuart, who remained isolated and irate in Islamabad.

In addition to providing aid for the refugees, the Australian Government was the first Western nation to recognise the newly declared state of Bangladesh in early 1972. And more than that, the Australian Government forged a coalition of Western and non-aligned countries to recognise Bangladeshi independence, forcing the Pakistani Government into a corner and stopping them from retaliating. Waller was at the centre of the quite complex diplomatic task, organising with Australian ambassadors and high commissioners across the globe and in real time, persuading allied countries to get on board and support Bangladeshi recognition. In Waller's words, the Australian Foreign Service 'mounted a vigorous diplomatic effort to get a number of countries' to recognise Bangladesh.[27] At this time, major Western powers were reluctant to

25 Sir Keith Waller, *A Diplomatic Life: Some Memories*, Australians in Asia Series, July 1990 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 1990), 45–46.

26 Diary entry, 12 April 1969 in 'Lord Casey's diaries, 1965 – June 1976', vol. 29, Box 31a, subseries 4.4 Lord Casey's diaries (photocopies), series 4 Diaries and Letterbooks, Casey family. Papers of the Casey family, 1820–1978 [manuscript], NLA MS 6150.

27 Waller, *A Diplomatic Life*, 46.

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recognise the independence of a secessionist province: the US Government refused to recognise Bangladesh as it was closely allied with Pakistan; the Canadian Government feared recognition would fan the flames of its own rogue province, Quebec; the UK Government were hedging their bets; and the Japanese Government had adopted a 'wait and see' approach. Thus, the Australian Government's formal recognition of the People's Republic of Bangladesh was a case of it showing regional leadership and sticking its neck out to support the independence of a vaguely socialist, predominantly Muslim nation.

Christians

Christians were major aid donors who helped provide relief for Bangladeshi refugees and were pivotal in making the Bangladeshi refugee crisis a non-partisan issue. Both Protestants (mostly Anglicans, Methodists and Baptists) and Catholics were equally active in mobilising, lobbying and fundraising for Bangladeshi refugees and overcame sectarian divisions to work collaboratively on the issue. Leaders within the various Christian churches were also very effective lobbyists, with ready access to the Prime Minister's Office, and their seniority within the church bestowed a certain gravitas on their views. Unlike ordinary constituents who wrote to the prime minister and received a reply from the prime minister's private secretary, church leaders received replies direct from the prime minister himself, suggesting that their letters were read by McMahon while other constituent letters did not pass the secretary's desk.[28]

Len Reid

Len Reid was an outspoken advocate for cash donations to the Indian Government to run the refugee camps. He was a Christian first and a politician second. After a couple of terms in the Victorian Parliament, he was elected the federal member for Holt, an electorate in the outer south-eastern suburbs and urban fringe of Melbourne. He was a Liberal politician, though he acted like more of an opposition MP and was a constant thorn in the McMahon Government's side. Reid established

28 Example letters from constituents and the clergy can be found in 'Constituent correspondence, June 1971': Files 47 and 49, Box 442, Series 17 Prime Minister 1967–72, William McMahon and Liberal Party of Australia, Papers of William McMahon, 1949–1987 [manuscript], NLA MS 3926.

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the Christian charity, *For those who have less* in 1962, an organisation dedicated to addressing poverty and famine in India, Pakistan and Nepal. Driven by Christian values of service to God and helping the poor with humility and service, he believed it was 'God's will and our privilege to help'.[29] He strongly advocated what he termed 'sacrificial giving'. What constituted sacrificial would vary from person to person, but the point was that the degree of giving should be so significant that one should suffer as a result. Giving is not about feeling good about yourself, he reasoned: it's about sufferance. Quoting Mohandas Gandhi, Reid explained that whenever one person suffers voluntarily, it relieves someone else of suffering: 'everyone who fasts gives bread to another who needs it more – everyone who makes some sacrifice helps someone else somewhere'.[30]

Reid's Christian beliefs were at the forefront of his appeal to Australians, invoking references to the Crusades. He argued that, as a Christian community, 'we must take more responsibility for the great human problems that confront so many people around the world' and it is up to the non-government sector 'to campaign more vigorously. If necessary, they should crusade'.[31] Reid's rhetoric was at times confrontational, challenging Australians to put into action their Christian values. In his words, 'If Australia is to continue to call herself a Christian community, we can no longer procrastinate while millions face famine conditions'.[32]

As a member of parliament, Reid travelled to West Bengal on behalf of the government, visiting some 30 refugee camps. With each camp home to approximately 5,000 refugees, Reid estimated that he had seen the lived conditions affecting 150,000 refugees. During this visit, he consulted with government, inter-government and non-government organisations on the ground. With this knowledge, he lobbied the McMahon Government to do more during the refugee crisis in 1971 and for reconstruction and rehabilitation during 1972. In one letter to the prime minister, Reid wrote:

29 Len Reid, *The Tragedy of Those Who Have Less* (Melbourne: Fraser & Morphet, 1973), 23.
30 Ibid., 7, 13, 63.
31 Ibid., 25.
32 Ibid., 62.

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> I know the Australian people to be generous and fair minded and where there are injustices they react strongly, for these reasons it will be necessary for us to raise our Aid priorities … The people in Australia will soon demand that we accept a greater responsibility in these countries and I feel we could well seize the initiative.[33]

Reid dedicated much of his only term in the Federal Parliament to lobbying the Australian Government to increase its aid commitment to Asia. It appears that he did so purely for compassionate reasons and was not interested in grandstanding or accounting tricks to impress the public. Specifically, Reid advocated for cash over material (or in-kind) donations.

He was a straight shooter and didn't hold back in his correspondence with the prime minister. Reflecting on events the previous year, in March 1972 Reid wrote:

> During this [refugee] crisis I repeatedly stated that India and the United Nations needed cash – not goods – to provide immediate relief for the refugee. However, my pleas might just as well have come from a junior office boy in the Foreign Office for all the notice that was taken.
>
> I might add I had good reasons for suggesting a cash donation of $10M for the refugees, as I had spent some time visiting a number of refugee camps during the Monsoon, and also had on the spot discussions with Mrs Gandhi and the Government of Pakistan, and they stressed their most urgent need was cash to purchase goods locally … Whoever made the decision not to send cash made the wrong decision, and it appears to me the less said on this issue the better.[34]

To clarify, cash donations are generally preferred by aid groups over in-kind donations. Cash can be sent quickly and used to purchase goods on the ground almost immediately. In-kind donations incur significant freighting charges and take time to transport to the refugee camps. There is also the view that in-kind donations are self-serving, for example, giving business to Australian companies when cheaper alternatives were available

33 'Letter. L. S. Reid, Member for Holt to the Rt Hon. William McMahon', 2 November 1972, File 114m Members' Correspondence. R., Box 449, Series 17 Prime Minister 1967–72, William McMahon and Liberal Party of Australia, Papers of William McMahon, 1949-1987 [manuscript], NLA MS 3926.

34 'Letter. L. S. Reid, Member for Holt to the Rt Hon. William McMahon', 30 March 1972, File 114, NLA MS 3926.

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closer to India. In-kind donations are thus a self-beneficial method to inflate artificially the aid budget and thus maximise positive publicity in the media and with the voting public, as well as earning political capital with other nations. Reid was perhaps ill-suited to the *realpolitik* in Canberra, not lasting more than one term in the Federal Parliament. His insistent calls for Australians to abandon their addiction to material possessions in pursuit of higher ideals no doubt closely aligned with other active Christians, namely, Baptist missionaries.

Baptist missionaries

Australian Baptist missionaries first worked in Bengal in 1882 and continue to work in Bangladesh to this day. Since 1882, over 250 individuals or couples have worked in the region, including 28 individuals who served during the early 1970s. Although these Christians provided aid to local communities in crisis, it should be clear that humanitarianism was not their raison d'être. Even amid the mass destruction and loss of life during the Bangladesh Liberation War, Baptist missionaries remained optimistic about prospects for Christian conversion of Bengali Muslims. In their end of year report in 1971, the South Australian Baptist Union commented:

> The outcome of the events [in Bangladesh] are what now concern us, and these are not only *thrilling*, but challenging. *Opportunities for effective evangelism among Moslems in Bangla Desh are more promising today than for many years*. The Mission is, therefore, looking to God to raise up the men and money to embark on concentrated evangelism in the new nation. How will we respond to the challenge of a nation that is looking for a satisfying faith? [Italics added][35]

Along with their evangelism, the South Australian branch of the Baptist Church provided material aid from afar, including food parcel delivery, medical care and other relief supplies for refugees.[36]

The Australian Baptist Church also sent missionaries to Bangladesh to promote Christianity in the region. When hostilities broke out in March 1971, there were 17 individuals working in the region, including three

35 South Australian Baptist Union Incorporated, *Handbook for 1971–1972*: *Programme and Reports for Autumn Assembly 1972* (Adelaide: Publisher Unspecified, 1972), 58.
36 Ibid., xvii.

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married couples.[37] Most of the Australian missionaries chose to return home or continued their work in India. However, three individuals – Rev. Ian Hawley, Miss Betty Salisbury and Miss Grace Dodge – stayed in Bangladesh throughout the war. They were based in the north at Mymensingh in a compound with 80 refugees, a town that Hawley later described as 'an awful place of death'. In a 2005 piece, Ian Hawley remembered that:

> Every night in Mymensingh during the months of November and December [1971] people were arrested on any pretence, with the Army's consent. Fanatical Muslims, it would seem, were given a free hand to kill whoever they wanted to kill. They unashamedly left victims' bodies on the edge of a river … Vultures and dogs feasted on them. The bodies of others were cut into pieces and thrown down wells. I have seen these wells full of dismembered bodies and also corpses being eaten by dogs on the river bank. How a person can act with such unrelenting savagery and utter contempt for the sacredness and value of human life is beyond all comprehension.[38]

Australian missionaries were unharmed during the conflict, though their properties were damaged and ransacked. Grace Dodge, one of the Australian missionaries, believed that the retreating West Pakistani Army torched the countryside in a final attempt at destruction, leaving the natural environment appearing more like the Australian bush after a fire than the verdant plains associated with Bengal. The local Christian community in Bangladesh had a low death rate as the Pakistani armed forces and militias targeted Hindus, as well as dissenters and professionals.[39] Australian Baptists sought divine wisdom to understand the unfolding conflict and to remain brave among escalating dangers. The missionaries maintained their faith and, in fact, saw the conflict as an opportunity to improve their standing with the locals and acceptance in the community. Beyond their missionary goals, Australian Baptists provided practical compassion for refugees, sheltering vulnerable populations – such as women and children – from the army.[40]

37 Tony Cupit, Ros Gooden and Ken Manley, *From Five Barley Loaves: Australian Baptists in Global Mission 1864–2010* (Melbourne: Mosaic Press, 2013), 124.
38 Ian Hawley, 'Reflections on the 1971 Civil War in Bangladesh', *Our Yesterdays: A Publication of the Victorian Baptist Historical Society* 13 (2005): 7–23, 19.
39 Grace Dodge, 'Birisiri Mission or Bunker Mission?' *Vision (Australian Baptist Missionary Society Magazine)* March 1972, 3, 5.
40 Dodge, 'Birisiri Mission or Bunker Mission?'.

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Australian Council of Churches

The Australian Council of Churches (ACC) is the peak body representing Anglican, Protestant and Orthodox churches, with its global headquarters in Geneva. Missionary zeal was also evident in this organisation, though there was an awareness that such proselytising could backfire. In a report sent to the World Council of Churches, ACC staff writer Bruce Best observed that Christians would be able to play a more prominent role in postwar Pakistan and Bangladesh but warned that students in particular were becoming dissatisfied with 'what they see as the pietism of the churches and the "missionary" mentality'. Best believed that young students were more likely to support Christianity in its practical dimension, especially projects that promoted social and economic equality rather than adhering to Christian theology alone. While postwar Bangladesh presented fertile ground for conversion, Best worried that it may be more than the local missionaries could control, commenting that 'this growing group [of students] may well become a radical force in the very near future'.[41]

Operationally, the ACC focused on advocacy, both at the top echelons of society and among local citizens. Crossing sectarian divisions, the ACC collaborated with Australian Catholic Relief to lobby the government for more refugee aid and encourage officials to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict. In a joint letter to the prime minister on 4 June 1971, the directors of Australian Catholic Relief and the ACC urged the government to keep the burgeoning crisis 'under constant review and to make further substantial grants as the opportunities occur'.[42] At the local level, the ACC dispatched circulars to all parish ministers throughout Australia, encouraging them to pray and seek donations from their congregants. In one such letter on 9 June 1971, the president of the ACC, Reverend David Garnsey, bishop of Gippsland in Victoria, reminded ministers

41 Bruce Best, Report: 'East and West of a Disaster, 7 February 1972' in File: East Pakistan Refugees – Relief Action 1972, Box 425.05.110: Projects East Pakistan Relief and Rehabilitation Service 1972, Series 425: Commission of Interchurch Aid, Relief and World Service (CICARWS), 1948–1992, Sub-fond: Programmes (1911–), Paper Archives of the World Council of Churches, Geneva.

42 'Letter. Wm. C. Byrne Executive Director, Australian Catholic Relief and E. H. Arblaster, Secretary-Director, Division of World Christian Action, Australian Council of Churches, to the Rt. Hon William McMahon, MP, 4 June 1971' in Folder: Pakistan, East and West, 1964–71, Box 117, Records of the Australian Council of Churches, 1911–1990, NLA MS 7645, MS Acc96.075.

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of the imperative of Christian compassion. He wrote, 'The Christian Churches have long felt a special responsibility to care for refugees who are forced to place themselves at the mercy of their fellowmen'.[43]

The ACC was the go-to destination for Christians wishing to volunteer their services in the refugee camps in India. The director of ACC, Reverend Ted Arblaster, received a number of letters from doctors and nurses, as well as Christian leaders, wishing to work on the ground. The rationale behind the offers of voluntary service ranged from evangelical to practical. Beginning with the evangelical, Mrs Maureen Bomford from Sydney wrote to Arblaster on 15 June 1971:

> Would the Australian Council of Churches be willing to send me to the Prime Minister of Pakistan?
>
> I know that God would be with me, in this undertaking and I am confident I could gain guarantee and security for the safe return of 6 ½ million refugees.
>
> For ten years I have been corresponding to all Prime Ministers, including Pakistan, and I have sent at least four letters this year to the present Prime Minister. I know that if the Australian Council of Churches have faith in me, God would do the rest.
>
> The biggest problems need the shortest way for solution. This would have God's approval.[44]

Other Christians based their expressions of interest on more practical grounds than religious. In a telephone conversation with Ted Arblaster, nurse Caroline Clough explained that her background and vocational training made her an ideal volunteer. In a scribbled hand-written note documenting their telephone conversation, Arblaster noted that Ms Clough was born in Calcutta and emigrated in 1947, aged 20. She spoke Hindustani (Hindi/Urdu) and was a trained nurse and practised at Wollongong's Port Kembla Hospital. Importantly, Clough had experience in nursing cholera, a skill particularly relevant as the refugee camps had endured a cholera outbreak that very month. Not wishing to limit her

43 'Letter. The Rt. Rev. David A. Garnsey, Bishop of Gippsland, President, Australian Council of Churches to Parish Ministers. 9 June 1971' in MP' in Folder: Pakistan, East and West, 1964–71, Box 117, Records of the Australian Council of Churches.

44 'Letter. Mrs Maureen Bomford to The Rev. E. H. Arblaster, 15 June 1971' and 'Letter. The Rev. E.H. Arblaster to Mrs Maureen Bomford, 22 June 1971' in Folder: Pakistan, East and West, 1964–71, Box 117, Records of the Australian Council of Churches.

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usefulness though, Clough affirmed that she would 'do anything' to help the refugees in the camps.[45] Arblaster also received offers of service from doctors Beryl Barber and Peter Bass, as well as (presumably nurses) Misses Betty Andersen and Dorothy Platt. Arblaster forwarded the contact details of these individuals to the executive secretary of the Australian refugee aid organisation Austcare, which was operating a medical clinic in a refugee camp.[46] However, all requests for volunteering on the ground were universally rejected as the refugee camps were well serviced by local health professionals in India. The ACC reiterated that Australian Christians could help most by offering cash donations and prayers.

Conclusion

This chapter draws our attention to a major event in recent refugee history that has largely been forgotten outside of South Asian communities. It is hard to believe that a refugee crisis on this scale has been overlooked for so long. The declassification of government archives in Western countries should facilitate research into this topic. However, government archives only provide a limited perspective, outlining bureaucratic machinations and policy debates. Though these areas are valuable to historians, government sources cannot shed light on the actions of individuals and organisations outside of government.

The lack of historical scholarship on the Bangladeshi refugee crisis is problematic, as it implicitly leads to the conclusion that this event does not matter or warrant remembrance. It also implies that individual Australians did not care or do anything to address the suffering of others. Too often, the Bangladesh Liberation War and international involvement – if it is ever mentioned – is reduced to the charity concert in New York City in August 1971 that was initiated by Beatle George Harrison. This focus on the actions of one celebrity in New York City obscures the actions of an array of individual Australians who mobilised, prayed, lobbied government, fundraised and travelled to the region to contribute something, *anything*, to aid the Bangladeshi refugees in India. Furthermore, Australian diplomats and Christians were active from the early months of the conflict and at

45 Scribbled note of conversation between the Rev. E H Arblaster and Mrs Caroline Clough, in Folder: Pakistan, East and West, 1964–71, Box 117, Records of the Australian Council of Churches.
46 'Letter. The Rev. E.H. Arblaster to Mr Parish, Executive Secretary of Austcare, 22 June 1971' in Folder: Pakistan, East and West, 1964–71, Box 117, Records of the Australian Council of Churches.

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the forefront of the broad-based movement to provide aid to Bangladeshi refugees. Their commitment to this cause was strong, and in the case of the missionaries and the Allens, they stayed in Bangladesh at considerable risk to their own safety. Despite government inertia and equivocation, Christians and diplomats challenged their political leaders to do more for these Asian refugees, and failing that, took matters into their own hands.

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