**Mr. F. Stephen Miles**



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Age: 86

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Interviewed by: Jamil Iqbal and Ansar Ahmed Ullah

Mr. Miles was the Deputy High Commissioner, Kolkata, India, 1970-74 and High Commissioner,Bangladesh, 1978-79. He witnessed the gathering of half a million people in Kolkota in January 1972 when Mujib flew from London on his way back to independent Bangladesh. As a diplomat he visited many refugee camps in Kolkata where the Indian Government accommodated roughly 10 million Bengali people who fled persecution from the hands of the Pakistani army.

I served in the diplomatic service from 1948 to 1980 and in the service we were allowed a choice, where we wanted to serve, and I said after having served in Ghana, I decided, I liked to serve mostly in the new Commonwealth countries. I was interested primarily in what happened after the existing colonies became independent. I wanted to see the relationship developed between Britain and the countries of the Commonwealth and whether it was a success or wasn’t it. Well, it was a mixed picture but on the whole I think it was a success. One thing, Commonwealth and America has given us an international language, English, which is extremely useful. If we didn’t have it, we would have a lot of problems in the air traffic control and internet and so on. Secondly, I think, we had made lot of mistakes and terrible things happened as well, like Burma didn’t join the Commonwealth. Now Zimbabwe is out of the Commonwealth. On a whole a sprit of the fact that we can all speak together in the same language, it has some sort of common background of parliamentary democracy. If you want to compare and don’t want to be too negative about the other imperial powers, what about France, the French commonwealth, Russia, Japan and the Belgians in the Congo, the Dutch and the Dutch East Indies, Portuguese and Mozambique and Angola. What is left? Nothing, to be a bit self satisfied at least there is something left, which is worthwhile to the world and it is of course a multiracial Commonwealth, which has bridges, black and white and that was the background to what I liked to serve in these countries. I served in Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia India, Pakistan (West Pakistan and East Pakistan) and Bangladesh. During my service I haven’t spoken any other languages, apart from English which was convenient.

What has happened I have recorded my career, basically retired ambassadors and high commissioners in Foreign Service throughout the world, were asked for recording their history and experience and all these recorded papers were collected and archived in Churchill College, Cambridge.

I was the First Secretary in Dhaka and Lahore in 1954; I was the Deputy High Commissioner in Calcutta in 1970, and High Commissioner in Dhaka, Bangladesh 1978.

Shall I read out the sections of my experience first experiences in Pakistan?



**[Mrs Miles adding to the interview]**

A highlight of my memory was when Sheikh Mujib came back and he called in Calcutta and there were half a million people on the maidan (large field), it was such a huge, huge crowd. We got out to the roof of our office building, we were looking to the maidan and watched it all from underneath, I have never seen, ever, a solid, solid mass of people, and it was amazing.

I think what I did much more often then Stephen did, was when there were roughly ten million refugees close to Calcutta, I used to go out and help some of the British organisations like Save the Children and Oxfam and people who were helping look after those people. I wasn’t doing anything regularly, because I had more of a job in the office, but we used to take people like Mother Teresa out, because she had her sisters working there.

I wasn’t working then. I was working on my own, it was looking after all the households and the party and all those things you have to do. We were working sort of individually, we'd go out to various organisations, I was working with Mother Teresa and she was an amazing person. It was a great privilege to know her.

I don’t speak Bengali, so any conversation would have to be with an interpreter. I wasn’t political, I was going because there were British organisations working for them. If we wanted to be able to know if they were short of anything, we reported back and we were writing to London, if they were short of anything so they were sending the requirements.

**[Mr Miles]**
I served in East Pakistan, as it then was, 1954-55. The Bengalis have always given us trouble (sorry about that!). They did in British days, and this was no exception because the Bengalis had strongly resisted the imposition of Urdu on East Pakistan by the Pakistan government. The Muslim League which was in charge in Dhaka was then overthrown in the first election, and a left-wing group took over, the Awami League. One of the leaders of that group was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who I, again following the principle that it was a good thing to get to know the people who might later get into power, got to know and his friends very well. They were real rabble rousers but very attractive chaps, most Bengalis are. There were more riots at the time of the election.

In the Indian sub-continent, what happens when the government breaks down is for the government to be dismissed, a governor to be put in and it becomes governor's rule. They then govern without a parliament. In this case General Iskander Mirza, who I knew quite well, was put in as governor but he was called off to become Prime Minister of Pakistan and, believe it or not, the chap who had to take over at this point, according to the constitution, was the Chief Justice, who happened to be British, Sir Thomas Ellis, a kindly, delightful man, who would scarcely scare a mouse, but very fair, very sensible. He found himself in full control of East Pakistan as in colonial days. Isn't it rather extraordinary that a British, ex-ICS man, ex-judicial man, should seven years after independence be running the eastern half of Pakistan, but nobody seemed to think it was at all odd!

Then I moved to West Pakistan, '55-56. The biggest problem we faced there was in 1956, I was serving in Lahore, when the Suez trouble blew up. We were faced with an unruly mob (because Pakistan was, of course, a Muslim country) surrounding and wanting to attack the High Commission, so we had to have police protection. This was the first and only time when I never tried to defend my government's policy. I was not prepared to lie for my country. It would not have gone down well because we had our Pakistani friends and they would not have believed me. I was the First Secretary, actually. The Deputy High Commissioner was Martin Moynihan. We had excellent protection from the Pakistan police who kept out the mob. I was rather touched when the Superintendent of police in charge of the operation happened to be a gentleman called Fazal Mahmud, who was the best seam bowler in the world. Occasionally we were honoured by being allowed to play with him against the Gymkhana Club, I being a cricketer. This was a special honour to find ourselves protected by this delightful Police Superintendent.

**[Mrs Miles]**Just one thing about East Pakistan, we were there for the Adamjee Jute riots. A vast number of people were killed in that time. That was 1954-55, that was an inter-communal riot between the local Bengalis and Biharis.

**[Mr Miles]**
Calcutta 1970-74. I was in America in 1970 serving as a Consul General and suddenly I was offered Calcutta on promotion. I was not immediately wildly enthusiastic. It is one of the most dreadful cities in the world but obviously one had to go. The reason for my appointment, I discovered, was that they were looking for somebody who had been through troublous times, and the mutiny in Tanzania was considered to be such. The north east of India was suffering a very severe terrorism attack by the Naxalite Communists. They were complete anarchists and they were just out to kill members of the establishment. For instance, in one year forty-five police were killed, mostly knifed in the back, in West Bengal. West Bengal then was turned over to Governor's rule. One of my jobs was to keep in close touch with the administration - a charming ex-ICS Governor trained under the British, the charming Chief Secretary also old ICS, the Police Commissioner, Mr Ranjit Gupta, proud to be the last Indian policeman trained at Scotland Yard, and the Major General, Mr Chowdry, who had fought through the North African campaign and was proud to have been part of a Ghurkha British Regiment. They were all splendid chaps who were all very easy to do business with. There were some hundreds of British citizens, businessmen and tea planters

The new government really took on the Naxalites and by very tough measures, tougher probably than we had ever used to put down our rebellions in India, they did get on top of the problem after a couple of years. There were difficult situations. There was, for instance, no British person was killed, but there was a British priest in Calcutta working in the city who was told he was going to be killed by the Naxalites. He did not want to leave. I thought perhaps he should leave. But one of my British business friends, who had lived in India for years, said we must not be seen to be giving in. So I did not tell him to go and to my relief he was not killed. Those were the sort of situations that were very difficult.

For my own protection I was given a bullet-proof car. Because a rumour got around to the Police Commissioner that they were thinking of kidnapping a diplomat and I was the most likely one he thought, I had two Ghurkha guards on my house with their kukris, who had retired from the army, and a police van with armed police followed me everywhere. Also a Sub-Inspector Banerjee, plain clothes, carried around a little briefcase, in which he had a gun, and he followed me around everywhere, including on the golf course and we became very good friends.

A nice part of the job was visiting the tea planters in Darjeeling and Assam. We had a tricky time at the end of 1971. India went to war with Pakistan over Bangladesh. The war was going on from Calcutta only a few miles from Bangladesh. I remember the question came up, "Can our children come out at Christmas time? Is it safe". Not just my children, but the children of the British community. The message was passed back, send them on a British Airways flight. The local authorities were very good. They stopped the war for a few hours so that our children could disembark from the plane. The military flights were going on into Bangladesh with Indian soldiers. Then they resumed the war.

I am now sometimes asked what was our favourite post. There is great astonishment when I say "Well, Calcutta was perhaps the most interesting of them all". I think it was because of the Bengalis who had given us the most trouble in times of British rule, and had killed at lot of our administrators, were in fact those with whom we had so much in common. I remember for instance, sitting through a performance of Hamlet, which had been brought out by the British Council, and around me were local people beginning to recite the verses from Hamlet. Somehow it was their culture, their liveliness, their great sense of humour which appealed to us. We kept many friends there, the General and the Police Commissioner have both been over to stay with us in England.

We knew the Major General Chowdry, him and his family very well and our children knew their children. And often we went to each other’s houses. His house was in Fort William in Calcutta. Now the war had just broken out, the end of December 1971. General Chowdry didn’t take a major part in the war himself, because he was in charge of the Fort in Calcutta and the troops there, where he did have a small area in the south, which was his responsibility in the south of Bangladesh. One night he decided to rest from the war and invited us to dinner. While we were there a call came through for me, it was a message that the British Deputy High Commissioner in Dhaka had sent to me, which was that the Indian air force is firing rockets at the State House or the Government House in Dhaka, which was very close to the British High Commission in Dhaka. He asked us how this could be stopped because it was liable to hit British High Commissioner and General Prem Chowdry then said, I must stop them bombing and he got on the phone to the Indian military head quarters in Delhi and asked them to stop firing rockets at State House in Dhaka. Amazingly, the firing then stopped.

An amazing incidence happened about the same time in Calcutta, we invited members of the Scottish Society to a dinner dance at our house, 2 Hasting Parks Road in Calcutta. There were ninety due to come and as the war had started, there was a blackout so obviously we can’t go ahead but they all wanted to come. They said, they would drive through the black out and they all arrived at our house. General Prem Chowdry had promised us that he would send two pipers for the occasion. We thought they would not turn up because they would be too busy fighting the war. In fact they did turn up. General Chowdry always kept his word.

**[Mrs Miles]**We had ninety people all dancing in our house, we had a very big veranda, which was lovely and there were blinds you could put down. So we had no electric lights, we just had the odd candles because it was blackout. We didn’t want the Pakistanis bombing us, because we had lots of lights.

**[Mr Miles]**
My last post when I was High Commissioner. In '71 I mentioned Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who became the first president of Bangladesh. I went to see him when I was still in Calcutta, he was just taking over. A delightful chap, a delightful rogue, but he was really a chaotic administrator. Everything went downhill and he got assassinated, sadly. When I went back there in 1978, as High Commissioner, there was General Ziaur Rahman in charge. He had taken over in a coup but he was not a dictator in any way. He gave extremely good government, very easy to talk to. We had our second biggest aid programme in the world there. We were making some progress. The difficult problem was immigration to the UK. We had a large team of immigration officers who tried to decide whether families and children of Bangladeshis who, years back, had emigrated to England should join their menfolk. It is terribly difficult to decide who are not bogus. My officers thought that about forty percent of the applications were bogus. I sat through some of these interviews. A typical case would be a fairly young wife with two very small children and two big boys who she said were her sons. They were obviously her brothers or her cousins. This was a difficult problem that my immigration officers had to decide. I think they were always fair. They said, "Probably some we've let through who shouldn't have been, but if we are in doubt we give the benefit of the doubt".

Sadly then, after I had left, in the typical Bengali fashion, Ziaur Rahman was assassinated by a jealous general. I won't go into the later history but they are still not terribly stable. Of course, they are among the poorest countries in the world. We tried to help them with aid, but they have had these enormous problems of floods every year due to the cutting down of the trees in the Himalayas and rivers get out of control and this enormous rise in population all the time. It is a very difficult situation.

**When did you hear about the army crackdown in Dhaka? How did you get the message? Do you remember?

[Mr. Miles]**
My knowledge on the war is some what limited. The book that has been written by the Indian General on the lightening war is fairly accurate and I think it is very fair.

About the war of 1971, we knew very well, we had our Deputy High Commissioner in Dhaka and by and large we were on the side of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. I think the Pakistan Government handled this extremely badly. Right from the days of Jinnah, when he insisted on Urdu as the language of East Pakistan and had no feeling at all for the people, as the language was absolutely vital for the country. This whole situation gradually built up right from the beginning to 1971. When Sheikh was imprisoned, I can’t remember when he was put in prison, certainly there throughout the war. The Indian army had a great advantage that the line of supplies could get straight through Calcutta. It was difficult for the Pakistani army, apart from the fact that the people were against them. This was one of the reasons that the Indian army could finish the war so quickly.

**What message were you getting from your Deputy High Commissioner in Dhaka at that time? Was he sending messages about the atrocities and sufferings?

[Mr. Miles]**
The atrocities did happen. There is no doubt about that. The political discontent was certainly reported by the Deputy High Commission, Mr Bridgend (?), I think he did his job well on that. Now, this leads us to the question of refugees. The number announced was 10 million and that’s an incredible figure. We did visit on the Calcutta side and we visited some of the refugee camps and we found that a young Indian sub-divisional officer making very accurate counts and they have huge books, ledgers, in which they recorded all the families and children and where they came from and we were assured by the Indian Government that these figures generally found were accurate. There was a great deal of concern and interest in Britain at that time and we had forty British Members of Parliament who came out to Calcutta to visit the camp and find out exactly what was happening and all of them were entirely in favour of the Bangladeshi fight. Some of the members of parliaments were well known figures and we had to take care of them and visit the camps etc.

**[Mr Miles]**
The Indian government handled the situation extremely well, in my mind. There was a retired Colonel Malhotra (?) who was put in charge of the refugee problem and so it was a semi-military operation. Lot of the Indian charities and it was a lot, remarkably among the business communities, some were there giving practical help.

The worst mistake, in my mind, the Pakistan Government did was to attack India by bombing some of the towns in the Punjab. Now the Indian were prepared for it. Now we had the High Commissioner, Sir Terrence Garby, and his wife, visited Calcutta towards the end 1971 and they wanted to go up and visit Sikkim and we stayed with the Chagyal of Sikim and as we drove to North and again South, near the border of Bangladesh there was large number of Indian army transport and soldiers and they were clearly getting into position, expecting for war and was ready for it. What happened was that the Pakistani air bombers, bombed towns in the Punjab and Mrs Gandhi immediately ordered her soldiers into Bangladesh, whether she was hoping for it or not, she was ready for it and had been prepared for.

When the war broke out, Mrs Gandhi was actually in Calcutta and she was staying at the government house there. The Governor, Mr Dias, an ICS man, and Mrs Gandhi were having tea and a messenger came and very quickly Mrs Gandhi looked at the message and rushed out. After a very short time she came back in and said what has happened. She has just been informed by military headquarters that Pakistan had bombed India and she gave the orders for the troops to straight go into East Pakistan. She then went in and started conversing with Mr Dias on trivial things. This is an example of the powerful and decisive nature of Mrs Gandhi. That’s a little story for you!

**What was the instruction given to you by the British Government and the lines to take while the war was going on?

[Mr Miles]**
I think we kept fairly quite but it was pretty obvious that our signatories were with the people of Bangladesh. The members of parliament took it out and publicised it and were all along with the Bangladeshi people. In Calcutta, I was also covering North-East India and we (the British High Commission) stayed out of this conflict.

**Can you tell us a bit about the role India played for the Bangladeshi Liberation movement and how Mrs Gandhi got support from the British Government or other countries in general?

[Mr Miles]**
I think it goes back to Kashmir because for all the sympathy for Pakistan than India simply because the United Nations, backed by ourselves, had wanted to see a plebiscite in Kashmir but India refused to allow that but when India went into East Pakistan, the sympathies were for India and Bangladesh.

**Were you in touch with the exile government of Bangladesh in Calcutta?

[Mr Miles]**
Not officially. If it was it was through one of my staff. I had to maintain an act of impartiality. My staff, she had friends in the exile government and one of them became a minister.

**Can you tell us about the condition of the refugees coming in Calcutta? Were they injured and were they well looked after?

[Mr Miles]**
I can’t remember injured people but some of them must have been. Most of them were ordinary villagers who walked out fearing the Pakistan troops. My impression was that Indian charities and Indian Government with support of British charities kept the refugees alive. There were lots of food coming from overseas and India, and were certainly fed. I remember having an argument with the British Deputy High Commissioner. He didn’t think the need of sending out British baby food, Fairex, who wouldn’t be used to it. So then I asked Mother Teresa, what she thought and she was feeding Fairex and baby food to the children and they were very happy with it.

**[Mrs Miles]**They were arriving having walked so they were weary, tired and hungry and brought nothing with them. Sometimes they managed to bring their cooking pot but often nothing except the cloths they were wearing and even the sandals were wearing thin. We went to the camps all over the place, many different areas. Invariably the Indians had mostly tents but it was all clean and organised and there was water laid on and they were being fed properly. It was an incredible job that the Indian government did. Nowhere did we see people who were injured or anything like that. All they wanted to do was get back home again so they weren’t going to stay for very long.

**[Mr Miles]**
One British journalist argued whether the refugees wanted to go back because there were Hindus and if they decided to stay in India but when the day came to move back, they all did. These people wanted to go back to their villages. It was a remarkable operation.

**Did you get to see any freedom fighters camp?
[Mr Miles]**
No. This is something we will not get involved anyway.

**Do you have any memory of Sheikh Mujib?
[Mrs Miles]**A very likable man. We first met him in 1954.

**[Mr Miles]**
He was a student then and he was leader of the extremist over the language problem. I was always interested in politics and my assessment was that these people would be empowered sooner or later and I got to know them and we invited them around and they got their friends. One of them was Kamaruddin Ahmed.

**[Mrs Miles]**I have got a picture of this group and don’t think Mujib was in it but Kamaruddin is.

**[Mr Miles]**
We met him again when he established himself as president and we went to Dhaka in January 1971 and we called on him. Although he was a rabble rouser, I can’t deny that, I heard his speech on the maidan in Calcutta, where a million people turned out, he was certainly a great orator. It was a great mixture. Without the tragedy, he had the total inability to run the country and he simply put his friends and relatives in positions, mostly incompetents.

**Can you give an example of his inability to run the country?

[Mr Miles]**
I wasn’t there at that time. I, personally, can’t give any example of his inability to administer the country but it goes back to his cronyism and they were incompetent. Many politicians put their hands in the till. This went on in an unsatisfactory way till the coup by General Ziaur Rahman. He did bring in a new attitude and did demand not to engage in corruption and set a good example for his ministers and politicians to declare their wealth. For the time I was there for two years, there was a good administration. He was elected through parliament. At that time there was still one of Sheikh Mujib’s friends, a very old politician and a good friend of ours. He was one of the more moderate and more sensible and well educated and he did become the chief minister of East Pakistan at that time and he was still there when we went back in 1978. He was asked by Ziaur Rahman to become his prime minister. He said he was too old for it and didn’t want to do it.

**You were in East Pakistan in 1954 and then in Bangladesh in 1978. Did you see any change in the out look of the people in 1954 and then in 1978?**

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**[Mr Miles]**The great difference was that the Bengalis had their own country now, whereas in 1954, the governor of the day was General Iskander Mirza. We knew him quite well and he was a good man but he wasn’t a Bengali and Bengalis wanted to rule themselves and that was the change in government and control. They had their own country and independence. Physically, country has changed. Dhaka developed new hotels. After the war, in 1971, there was a big effort to bring in aid and try to restore the country to a better position, economically. There were three things we did and I came there in 1978. There were three aspects of the country we were trying to help, one, was the building of bridges and we did send our engineering firms to view that, railway bridges mainly. There was the electricity supply in Dhaka and Chittagong and there were the key industries devastated by the war, there were tea plantation which needed to be looked after. We also helped villages to grow their crops. I also knew someone from IDS, University of Sussex, who was studying the strain of rice. He stayed in villages and experimented with rice which will grow above the water all the time. There was another who went to the village to study on rodents who ate the rice. Official figure was that 8% of rice was consumed by rats in villages. The village he was studying 2% was consumed by rats and the reason being that the previous experiment was done on rice left on ground for several months without being disturbed. But in the village the pile of rice is shovelled out the rice didn’t get eaten as much.

**Do you want to say something about Bangladesh? The second time you were there.

[Mrs Miles]**It was interesting going back the second time because such a lot had happened at Dhaka. I think it quadrupled or tripled the number of people living in Dhaka. Suddenly it was a capital city and there were far more people and housing spread all over the place. A new airport was built further out. It was almost like a different place to go to. There were very few of our old friends because it was many years later. We knew a number of people at the university and in fact the geography professor asked if I would like to go and lecture at the university being a geographer. I didn’t want to because I was looking after my husband and office and all that kind of thing. None of the old professors we knew were there. I think many of them went to America or died. So we didn’t meet up with many of our old friends. We were happy there. By this time one of our children were at university so we didn’t see much of them as we have done in other posts. We were lucky. We used to go up to the tea gardens and stay with tea planter friends. That gave a weekend of peace and quite which was rather nice. Loved going on the train. It was a treat going on trains. We would also go into Calcutta from there and meet our friends, that was nice and it was only twenty minutes on the plane. We were happy there. We knew it was Stephen's last post because it is very strict in the foreign office. You retire when you are sixty on your birthday. There is no question of staying or doing a part-time job.

When we were there first time I was one of the ladies who started up a women’s voluntary association whereby there was a Canadian lady, I think she was a nurse, in a voluntary capacity working in Bangladesh. There were four or five of us started up this voluntary organisation to help Bangladeshi women to earn a living, to learn weaving, embroidery and doing things they could sell and we had a shop. I was the treasurer of this organisation. So when we went back, there were one or two people I knew then so I was greeted with great enthusiasm. That was nice. It was a big organisation that we have become.

The food was fine. When I went the first time, I was newly married and have never been abroad before. I was never very well. I got dysentery and in and out of doctor’s surgery. So when we were sent to Calcutta, I said to the medical people in London that I had dysentery in Dhaka and is it a good idea to go back to Bengal again and somebody who had been a doctor said that the house you are going to had good pipes so the water supply was obviously good in Calcutta and it proved to be because we were both very well. Going back to Dhaka was so much better.

Further interview with Stephen Miles on 11 November 1996 by Malcolm McBain: [(PDF, 107KB)](http://www.swadhinata.org.uk/files/Miles_Stephen.pdf)