

## AN UNDIPLOMATIC DIPLOMAT

The Brian Lea Affair, as it became generally known, was an embarrassing episode for the British government and its High Commission in Uganda. The case revolved around the purported kidnap of the First Secretary to the High Commission, Brian Alistair Lea, which was quickly proven to be staged. It involved some Asian men, who conspired with the 49-year-old Lea to highlight the supposed plight of Ugandan Asians who held British passports and yet were being, unjustly he felt, denied entry to the United Kingdom. Lea later claimed he was sympathetic to the cause of the Asians and had therefore agreed to participate in the staged kidnap to exert pressure on the UK government to change Britain's immigration policy. Had the ruse been genuine, it would have been the first-ever Commonwealth kidnapping episode of a diplomat.



*Brian Lea, First Secretary British High Commission, Kampala*

In late April 1970, four men, comprising three Asians, B. Rao, Shafique Ahmed and P. Gosai, together with one Briton, Brian Lea, travelled forty kilometres south from Kampala to Entebbe town on the shores of Lake Victoria, in a white Ford Taunus, from where they hired a boat to take them to Nkunze island, not far from Nkumba beach. Before departing for the island, they contacted a small group of (seven) local fishermen. They hastily negotiated with the fishermen to construct a small grass hut for them on the island, informing

them that they had a group of visitors who needed a change of climate and some quiet rest for a few days. Expressing the need for urgency, they told them they would return on 2<sup>nd</sup> May.

That same evening, a man with an Asian accent telephoned Lea's residence, informing his wife, Jeanne, that her husband had been kidnapped and then, without giving any further details or ransom demands, hung up. Almost immediately thereafter, a similar call was made to the residence of the British High Commissioner, again without any details or ransom demands. By dusk that evening, the news of the kidnapping was on the radio and circulating on other media channels. It is said that when Lea and Shafique Ahmed heard the story on their transistor radio, they were overjoyed and celebrated with a bottle of imported whisky, along with some other form of entertainment, as we shall see.

The days that followed were full of public gossip and speculation, both in Uganda and abroad, about the motive for the abduction and, more particularly, the British diplomat's likely whereabouts. No doubt, there was equal panic and increased activity at the British Foreign Office in London. What no one could understand was the total lack of any ransom demands or even contact from the kidnappers, leading to more ominous predictions of doom and gloom.

This is an abridged version of how The Times newspaper, London, reported it on 4<sup>th</sup> May, 1970:

*'A British security expert, Mr Ralph Beaton, flew from London to Kampala (Entebbe, Ed), Uganda, last night to help in the search for a kidnapped British diplomat. The diplomat, Mr Brian Lea, a consular officer aged 49, disappeared on Saturday afternoon. Mr Beaton, aged 49, was told by a Foreign Office spokesman to go to Kampala to help the High Commissioner maintain a continuous liaison with the Ugandan authorities during the investigation. Yesterday, Mr Wilson, the prime minister, sent a personal message to Dr Obote, the President of Uganda, expressing concern about Mr Lea.'*

*'Mr Lea disappeared after driving to his office to deal with a telephone call from two people asking about some passports. His locked car was found later in the British High Commission car park.'*