

Indian Airlines hijacking highlights political tensions on the Indian subcontinent

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The hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight 814 has entered its sixth day with little sign of any immediate resolution. Six hijackers armed with knives, grenades and pistols are holding more than 150 passengers and aircrew hostage aboard the A300 Airbus parked at the Kandahar airport in southern Afghanistan. Most of the passengers are Indian citizens who were returning from Kathmandu in Nepal to New Delhi.

The flight was seized on Friday afternoon and landed briefly in Amritsar in India, Lahore in Pakistan and Dubai in the United Arab Emirates before being permitted to touch down at Kandahar. At Dubai, 27 women, children and men were allowed to leave the plane. The body of Rippan Katyal, who was reportedly stabbed to death by the hijackers for removing his blindfold, was also taken off the plane.

The hijackers—supporters of Kashmiri separatism—initially told the ruling Taliban authorities in Afghanistan that they wanted the Indian government to release Maulana Masood Azhar, a Muslim cleric from Pakistan, and several Kashmiris. Azhar travelled to India in 1992 to support the Kashmiri separatist movement, was arrested in 1994 and is imprisoned in a high security jail in Indian-held Kashmir.

Negotiations, firstly with the United Nations Coordinator for Afghanistan, Erick de Mul, and then with a team of Indian officials, have failed to end the siege. Indian negotiators only arrived on Monday after the hijackers threatened to kill the hostages. Limited supplies of food, water and medicine have been provided to the aircraft's occupants and a man suffering from diabetes has been released, but the hijackers turned down appeals to allow the remaining women and children to leave the plane.

On Tuesday, the demands were substantially increased. Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh announced that the hijackers were insisting on the release of Azhar and 35 other Kashmiri separatists, the payment of \$US200 million in ransom, and the return of the coffin of Sajjad Afghani, who was killed in an Indian jail in June allegedly during an escape attempt.

The Indian cabinet, which met on Tuesday, is unlikely to

agree to any of the demands. According to a report in the *Hindu*, the mood of the ministers, “without exception, was that the demands were obnoxious and could hardly be met”. Throughout the 1990s, the Indian army has been waging an often brutal war of attrition against various Pakistani-backed Kashmiri secessionist groups. Conservative estimates put the number of people killed in the conflict at between 10,000 and 15,000.

On Wednesday, the hijackers withdrew their demands for a ransom and the return of Afghani's coffin after being told by the Taliban that these were “un-Islamic”. But India's Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pramod Mahajan, speaking after a cabinet meeting in New Delhi, said that the concession “does not make a material change to the situation”. Afghan Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakel warned yesterday that his government would force the hijacked aircraft to leave Afghanistan unless the siege was ended quickly.

The hijacking has quickly brought to the surface the continuing tensions between India and Pakistan—both have accused each other of engineering the incident for political purposes.

At a press conference, Singh insisted that the hijackers had arrived in Nepal aboard a Pakistan International Airlines flight from Karachi, and pointedly noted their demand for the release of Azhar, who is connected to the Kashmiri separatist group, Harakat-ul-Mujahdeen, formerly known as Harakat-ul-Ansar. The organisation was allegedly responsible for the kidnapping of six tourists in 1995 in an unsuccessful bid to force the release of Azhar.

Indian officials and the media claim that four of the six hijackers are Pakistani citizens and accuse the Pakistani government of permitting Harakat-ul-Mujahdeen to operate from bases within its borders. An editorial in the *Times of India* asserted that this evidence “should amply demonstrate that country's [Pakistan's] role as a state sponsoring terrorism” and implied that international economic sanctions should be put in place against Pakistan if it did not help in the release of the hostages. Other press reports claimed that

Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) agency had been directly involved in planning the hijacking.

By attempting to shift the blame onto Pakistan, the Indian government is seeking to deflect criticism at home of its own actions. The relatives of the hostages and their supporters have staged protests in New Delhi outside the residence of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and broke open the gates to India's Civil Aviation Ministry. Media commentators have criticised the slow response of the government and its failure to prevent the aircraft leaving Indian airspace after landing at Amritsar.

Speaking on behalf of the relatives, Dr Sanjeev Chibber pointed to the double standards of Indian authorities. In 1989, Indian prime minister V.P. Singh freed imprisoned Kashmiri dissidents to secure the release of the daughter of his home minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed. If militants can be released for the sake of a minister's daughter, Chibber asked, why was there so much reluctance to do so when over 150 lives were at stake.

The Pakistani regime has vigorously denied Indian allegations of involvement in the hijacking, responding with counter-accusations of its own. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar suggested that Indian intelligence services had staged the hijacking as part of efforts to isolate the new military junta. "Perhaps the government of India manufactured another incident in pursuit of their aim of maligning Pakistan internationally. The possibility can no longer be ignored that the incident involves a preconceived design by a foreign intelligence organisation," Sattar said. Pakistani newspapers have published stories claiming that an Indian Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) agent was on board the hijacked airliner.

Pakistan and India came to the point of open military conflict in June after a Pakistani-backed force seized control of strategic heights in the Kargil-Dass-Batalik region of Indian Kashmir. Fierce fighting raged for weeks as the Indian army mounted a large-scale offensive to dislodge the heavily armed Kashmiri secessionists. Under pressure from the US, a long-time ally, Pakistan pulled out its forces and allied Kashmiri fighters in early July. Discontent over the backdown was one of the factors that enabled the armed forces to oust prime minister Nawaz Sharif and establish the new military regime headed by General Pervez Musharraf.

In the aftermath of the Kargil conflict, the US has moved to establish closer ties with the Indian government—a coalition of parties led by the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The Clinton administration has been quick to condemn the hijacking and, according to press reports, has provided India with intelligence information on Kashmiri separatist groups. Indian Foreign Minister Singh told a news conference: "I am entirely satisfied by the

support India has received from the United States."

Afghanistan has already been under enormous pressure from the US, which insisted on UN economic sanctions against the country over its failure to extradite Osama bin Laden, alleged to be responsible for the bombing of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. Within the US, government authorities and the media have been attempting to link bin Laden to a fresh terrorist scare following the arrest of Algerian Ahmed Rissan on December 14 said to have had "bomb making materials" in his car when crossing from Canada. In mid-December, the Clinton administration issued an extraordinary blanket warning that it would hold Afghanistan directly responsible for terrorist attacks on American citizens anywhere in the world.

The Islamic fundamentalist Taliban regime in Afghanistan has been careful to distance itself from the hijacking and to demonstrate that it has no sympathy for or connection to the perpetrators. Afghan Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakel has stressed that his government will not harbour the hijackers and warned them that it "does not want the blood of innocent people to fall on the soil of Afghanistan". Taliban officials have threatened to storm the aircraft if there is any sign that the hostages are in danger.

The Indian negotiating team has held talks with Mutawakel as well as the top Taliban military commander in Kandahar. Indian officials refused to comment on whether discussions had taken place on a commando operation to seize the aircraft and end the siege.



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