

Afghan hijacking in fourth day at London's Stansted airport

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The third day of the Afghan hostage crisis ended dramatically with the escape of four people through the cockpit window at the front of the plane. Earlier in the day, the hijackers released a ninth person who was allowed off the seized jumbo jet after he complained of feeling unwell.

The drama began for Britain when the Ariana Afghan Airlines Boeing 727 entered British air space on February 7 and requested permission to land. Air traffic controllers persuaded the hijackers to divert to London's third largest airport Stansted, rather than Heathrow or Gatwick. Stansted is the designated airport where police and the SAS regularly train in hijack scenarios.

The Boeing is Afghanistan's only remaining Western jet aircraft, due to sanctions imposed by the US in response to the alleged harbouring of Osama bin Laden by the Taliban regime in Kabul. It was hijacked during a flight to the Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif at around 5:30 GMT on Sunday morning and was flown to the Uzbeki capital of Tashkent.

It took off four hours later, after 10 passengers had been released. The plane was forced to land in the northern Kazakh city of Aktyubinsk because of a leak in a fuel tank, before landing in Moscow, where a further nine passengers were released. The flight to Britain was prompted by the hijackers' fears of being grounded by an approaching snowstorm, according to Russian government sources.

The aircraft landed at Stansted just after 2 a.m. Hostage negotiators joined a force of local and Metropolitan police officers, special forces Counter Revolutionary Warfare units, and SAS soldiers armed with Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine guns, body armour and concussion grenades.

Negotiations began at 5 a.m. with the six to eight

hijackers for the release of the 165 passengers and crew, including 122 men, 20 women and 23 children. By noon February 7, a further five hostages were released—two men, a woman and two babies aged three months and six months—followed by a further three hostages, a 36-year-old woman, her 47-year-old husband and an unrelated woman, 30, three hours later.

Stansted has been the scene of international hijacking dramas three times in the past 25 years, all of which ended in the surrender of the hijackers with no loss of life. Though the police and the Blair Labour government have stressed their desire for a peaceful negotiated solution in this case, they have made clear that no concessions will be made. At stake is the credibility of the British government's 20-year-old policy of no deals with hijackers that has operated since the PLO-sponsored hijackings of the late 1970s.

The seizure of the Ariana jumbo was said to have been encouraged by the Indian government's decision in December to release three prisoners, in response to demands from Kashmiri militants who seized an Indian jet and flew it to the Afghan city of Kandahar.

John Broughton, Assistant Chief Constable of Essex, told the press, "It is not the UK policy to let [hijacked] aircraft take off again once landed." When asked if the army or SAS were on standby, he added, "There is a full range of resources available."

No group has, as yet, claimed responsibility for the hijacking and the police have not reported any demands being made by the hijackers. It has been widely reported, however, that the hijackers are seeking the release of Ismail Khan, a prominent leader of the opposition to Afghanistan's Taliban government. One hostage released in Tashkent said the hijackers were from Afghanistan's Tajik ethnic minority and spoke a dialect of Persian. Khan, 58, is a Tajik and speaks

Persian.

Known amongst his supporters as the Lion of Herat, Khan first rose to prominence during the Mujahedeen's struggle against the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989. A former Afghan army officer, he joined the Mujahedeen after Soviet forces massacred an estimated 25,000 people in the western city of Herat, during an uprising against the pro-Moscow regime of President Najibullah. Khan led a counterattack, recaptured the town and went on to launch a series of successful raids against Russian troops.

In the years that followed the Soviet army's departure in 1989 and the collapse of the Najibullah government in 1992, Khan established a personal fiefdom in the Herat region and made a bid for a role in the national political leadership of the Mujahedeen. But internal dissent and the rise of the Taliban put paid to these ambitions.

The US, Britain and other Western powers backed the Mujahedeen financially and militarily. But the Taliban, or Students of Islam, were eventually the main political beneficiaries of what became a proxy struggle between the Stalinist regime in Moscow and the US, which cost 1 million Afghan lives.

The Taliban emerged from Pakistan's universities and religious schools as a loosely organised student militia. They were developed by Pakistan's ISI intelligence service from amongst the 6 million Afghan refugees in camps there. They propound an extreme form of Islamic fundamentalism and have sought to restore the traditional domination of the Pashtun ethnic group over Afghanistan.

Faced with a Mujahedeen deeply split between pro-Pakistani and pro-Iranian factions, they were able to swiftly rise to dominance within the war-ravaged country. Khan, who supported pro-Iranian forces, was routed from his Herat stronghold in 1995. He fled to Iran before the Taliban finally took power in 1996, but was betrayed by a fellow opposition commander and has been imprisoned since 1997.

Mullah Mohammed Omar, the cleric who leads the Taliban militia, has used the alleged demand for Khan's release to blame Ahmed Shah Massoud's Jamiat-i-Islami movement for the hijacking. Massoud, who is supported by Khan, leads the most powerful armed opposition group in Afghanistan. He is prominent

within the mainly Tajik Northern Alliance, which supports former President Burhanuddin Rabbani, who briefly held power before being driven out of office by the Taliban in September 1996 and who still controls about 10 percent of the country in the north. The Northern Alliance has denied any connection with the hijacking and described it as an act of terrorism against innocent people.

Britain, along with every other country except Pakistan and two Gulf states, does not recognise the Taliban regime. It does have diplomatic links with the Tajik coalition, which is also recognised by the UN as the government of Afghanistan. The British Foreign Office has, however, set up a "channel of communication" to the Taliban through the British High Commissioner in Islamabad and the Taliban's representative in New York.

The Taliban regime has said that they will not make any concessions to the hijackers and are pushing for a tough line from the Blair government. Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, the Taliban's Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism, said the UK authorities should end the hijack by storming the plane, while General Rahmatulla Safi, the Taliban representative in Europe, expressed confidence in the SAS as "absolutely professional and the most well known in the world".



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