

After the hijacking: British government, media demand deportation of Afghanis

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The Afghan hostage crisis at London's Stansted Airport ended yesterday morning with the release of all the 151 plus passengers and the arrest of 19 people.

Earlier speculation that the incident was an attempt by the hijackers and 40 members of their immediate families—who had booked onto the plane as a wedding party—to escape the repressive Taliban regime in Afghanistan and secure political asylum in Britain, has been broadly confirmed. Reports said the hijackers of the Ariana Afghan Airlines Boeing 727 were demanding immunity from prosecution and the right to set up an Afghan political opposition in Britain. At least 60 hostages are seeking political asylum in the UK, Home Office sources told the media.

Foreign nationals convicted of crimes in Britain would normally be deported at the end of their jail term—which for hijacking could be anything up to nine years—but under international law the government is also obliged to consider an asylum claim. Six men involved in the hijack of a Sudanese passenger jet in 1996 are still awaiting a decision on their claims, while a man involved in a 1982 Air Tanzania hijack was granted asylum having served two years of a three-year sentence.

The possibility of asylum applications being granted to those on the Ariana Afghan Airlines jet provoked a barrage of anti-immigrant propaganda and law-and-order outrage from Britain's press. *The Sun* tabloid newspaper dubbed the hijacking the “Scamsted scandal” and boasted of Home Secretary Jack Straw's “vow” that “if the hijack proved to be a scam he would boot all the Afghans straight back out of Britain”.

Essex Chief Constable David Stevens was even forced to answer questions over whether any hijack had in fact taken place. “I can certainly, categorically state, that when you find five knives, four handguns, one

knuckle duster, two detonators and two grenades without fuses, in my view that is a hijack,” he replied.

The *Times* accepted that the hijackers could not be sent back immediately to Afghanistan because they would be executed, but questioned whether the “appalling and savagely repressive” conditions they fled from “should influence sentencing policy. It should not ... severity is imperative.”

Telegraph columnist Philip Johnston went so far as to speculate that future copycat “refugee hijackings” would pose a quandary for the authorities. “On one hand, Britain is entitled under international law to send in the SAS to take the plane and kill all the hijackers,” while on the other hand it must “consider all requests for political asylum”.

In Straw's first official statement, he made clear the government's intention to join the xenophobic chorus over the Stansted drama. Promising to take personal charge, he told Parliament of his “wish to see removed from the country all those on the plane as soon as reasonably practicable.” As the flight had begun as an internal journey within Afghanistan, “it seems inconceivable that persons on the flight could have intended to claim political asylum unless of course they were complicit in the hijacking,” he added.

Straw's pledge to parliament amounts to a death sentence for many of those on the Afghan jumbo. The Islamic fundamentalist Taliban regime, which is not recognised by Britain and is routinely denounced for its repressive policies, will no doubt agree with Jack Straw that many of the passengers were complicit in the hijacking. It will take a no less negative stance towards the 60 or so passengers who are reported to have applied for political asylum. Last year 3,985 asylum applications were made in Britain by Afghanis seeking to escape the Taliban. Only a small number of these

were recognised, or given exceptional leave to remain.



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