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A Most Unusual Hijack

by Philip Baum

The last decade has been punctuated by occasional acts of aerial piracy, predominantly perpetrated by asylum seekers and normally brought to a peaceful conclusion within hours, or a day at most.

It would seem highly probable that the hijack of Indian Airlines flight IC814 (referred to at length in this issue of ASI) to Afghanistan in December 1999, and its portrayal as a successful demonstration of guerrilla warfare, would give not only inspiration but also similar ideas to others. It was surely no coincidence that the hijacking of an Ariana Afghan jet, operating on a domestic route (the airline is banned from operating international flights), occurred in Afghanistan within six weeks of the Indian Airlines hijack ending in the same country. This incident, however, was very different in all respects save for its duration.

When the jet eventually landed at London Stansted in the early hours of Monday 7th February, so began a three-day standoff between the Essex constabulary's negotiators and the hijackers. In the multitude of press conferences that were fielded, no motive for the hijack was ever disclosed by police spokesmen. This resulted in considerable media speculation as to the motive. Keen to develop a link with the Indian Airlines hijack, political motive was the initial line explored. Within hours, Ismail Khan, the imprisoned opponent of the Taleban regime in Afghanistan, became a known entity within the European political arena. Although it later became apparent that the hijackers had never demanded the release of Ismail Khan, the hijackers, who were undoubtedly disillusioned with Afghan life, had certainly managed to put Afghanistan under the microscope of the Western-controlled media.

If the hijack wasn't a political act designed to bring about change, it must

have been an expression of desperation by a number of people desiring to claim political asylum in the United Kingdom. The media opted to further investigate this possibility. However, once it became apparent that hostage release wasn't going to be quickly achieved and that the number of hijackers was still unknown, speculation grew that the crew themselves might have been members of the hijack team. It wouldn't have been the first time; in 1950, three Czechoslovak aircraft were hijacked to Munich on the same day by their crews.

Hostage-release was certainly not textbook material. There was no early release of women and children. That, combined with information that there was a wedding party of around 40 people on board, elevated concerns that Britain may be playing host to a whole plane load of asylum seekers.

On the Wednesday night, the cockpit crew escaped. Some were quick to brand them cowards and argued that they should have resisted the temptation on the grounds of endangering the lives of the remaining hostages and of having deprived the hostages and cabin crew of a figure-head that they knew was fighting their corner. Others took a less judgmental approach and felt that only the crew themselves could have made the decision. They had certainly succeeded in immobilising the aircraft, although they would have been aware that the British policy would have been to prevent it leaving in any case. Again, this would not have been the first instance of a crew escaping a hijacked jet; the Pan Am crew who escaped in Karachi also had to withstand the criticism of their actions.

In the early hours of Thursday all the hostages were released. Stansted had borne witness to its fourth hijack and had maintained its 100% record of ensuring the safe release of all passengers and crew. However the most sur-

prising statement came at the post-hijack police press conference. Despite the media's belief that the police had felt it wise to play their cards close to their chests vis-à-vis motive, the police maintained that not only had they not been given a motive during the incident but even after the event the hijack remained officially motiveless.

Whilst the aviation community was left to debate issues such as the rights and wrongs of crew escape, the Russians allowing the plane to leave Moscow on the first day, and the sense in branding London Stansted as "hijack airport", the general media moved onto the humanitarian issues. Should the perpetrators be granted asylum? Those who had hijacked the last plane to Stansted in 1996 had even had their convictions quashed. And what about the other hostages on the Ariana Afghan flight - should their asylum applications be considered?

I am very sympathetic to the plight of the many millions of people who may be justified in applying for asylum, but as Ann Widdicombe, the British Shadow Home Secretary said, we must "first deal with the criminality of the offence".

In the knowledge that there are many airports around the globe with poor, if any, security, especially on domestic routes, deterrent is of paramount importance. Security screening exemption on the grounds of religion or sex may be acceptable under certain societies norms, yet such procedural loopholes (somewhat an understatement, I agree) could result in a wave of hijackings in the future. Aerial piracy is exceptionally dangerous - it puts at risk the lives of the other passengers and crew on board. If we are to deter others from perpetrating such acts, the message of the courts this time clearly must be one of zero tolerance.

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