

Airliner hijacking puts a spotlight on Kashmir

by Ramtanu Maitra

The seven-day-long hijacking of the Indian Airlines flight from Kathmandu on Dec. 24, finally ended at Afghanistan's Kandahar Airport on Dec. 31, 1999. The Indian government handed over three terrorists imprisoned in the India-held part of Kashmir, and obtained the release of 160-plus passengers and crew. At least five of the hijackers, who had cold-bloodedly knifed a passenger to death inside the aircraft, were allowed to go free by the Taliban regime, and given ten hours to leave Afghanistan. Although the hijackers had not been sighted at the time of writing, there is little doubt that they have slipped across the porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border, into a safe haven in Pakistan.

The outcome of negotiations between New Delhi and the hijackers will have a telling effect in the subcontinent's already vitiated security situation. Notwithstanding New Delhi's claim that the swap of the three militants was necessary to save a planeload of innocent citizens from several countries, the victory clearly belongs to the hijackers. By striking a successful bargain, the hijackers have put a spotlight on their separatist demands for Kashmir, and have sent the message that they have the capability to strike anywhere, inside or outside of Kashmir.

The hand of Great Britain

Although the hijacking began in Nepal, which has become a nest of drug and gun peddlers operating under the protection of foreign intelligence agencies, particularly Pakistan's centipede-like Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the seizure of the plane was organized from abroad. The Indian daily *The Hindu* reported that Indian intelligence had intercepted calls to Mumbai (Bombay), Kathmandu, Saudi Arabia, and Kandahar by a close associate of a U.K.-based Harkat-ul-Mujahideen militant. This news is not surprising, because the Sri Lankan separatist Tamil Tigers and several Islamic terrorist organizations operate freely in Britain.

Also, two of the three terrorists released by New Delhi have direct links to the United Kingdom. Masood Azhar, who kidnapped and killed six foreigners in Kashmir, is a Pakistani citizen, but he entered India in 1994 using a Portuguese passport prepared for him by terrorists in Britain. Ahmed Omar Sayed Sheikh is a British citizen with a London School of Economics education. British officials have already indicated

that since Sheikh has not committed any crime in Britain, and India has not filed any legal case against him, this terrorist will be allowed to return to Britain.

But behind the hijacking lurks the policy, led by Britain, to make Kashmir an independent nation, ensconced strategically in the tri-border area of India, China, and Central Asia. This policy has been promoted regularly at the highest political level in Britain since 1947 when the dispute arose, by some U.S. Congressmen, and by others elsewhere in the West. This effort is under way at various levels. On the legislative level, the danger of a volatile Kashmir dispute leading to the use of nuclear weapons, is often cited to justify the claim for independence; human rights violations by the Indian Army, and riots between Shia and Sunni Muslims in the Pakistan-held part of Kashmir, are the favorite subject of some elected officials using Britain-based Amnesty International's and other non-governmental organizations' reports. The hijackers and their networks thrive under "democratic rituals" and academic rights.

Reactions in the subcontinent

Although the hijackers made their final preparations and boarded the plane in Nepal, the three main participants in attempting to end the hijacking were India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. India's initial response bordered on the ludicrous. Despite the advice of the military, New Delhi did not intercept the plane over Indian skies, but allowed it to go to Lahore, Pakistan, where landing was denied. The plane then went to Indian territory and landed in Amritsar. New Delhi, despite its stated intent, failed to detain the plane, and let it go back to Lahore.

New Delhi's bungling did not end there. When the plane finally landed in Kandahar, the Indians, not wanting to deal with the Taliban regime, which New Delhi does not recognize, dilly-dallied. As pressure mounted within the country for the government to talk to the hijackers, India opened channels to the Taliban. The inadequate manner in which the Indian government acted made it the target of vitriolic attacks domestically. The Army, in particular, was enraged, and publicly disagreed with the government's decision to release the three Kashmiri terrorists. The Army pointed out that allowing the imprisoned terrorists—who had killed thousands, and maimed as many in Kashmir—to go free along with the hijackers, who also killed one civilian, was neither a fair deal nor just. As if to underline the Army's anguish, Kashmiri militants exploded a bomb at a vegetable market in Srinagar three days later, killing 18 people, including two security personnel, and injuring and maiming a dozen others.

India's failure to keep the plane on the ground while it was in Amritsar, was immediately seized upon by Islamabad as an indication that the Indians themselves had orchestrated the hijacking—to defame Pakistan. Although the accusation was later dropped, Pakistan has been particularly riled by

statements issued by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, that India possesses evidence to “prove” that Pakistan was behind the hijacking, and hence must be tagged as a “terrorist state.” Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Abdus Sattar, quoted by Agence France Presse, countered that Vajpayee’s statement was “designed to divert domestic denunciations for the delay, inefficiency, and insensitivity” of his government in dealing with the hijacking, and to promote further “a pre-conceived objective of building a strategic relationship with the United States, on trumped-up charges of terrorism against Pakistan.”

What Islamabad is fending off at this point is the Indian charge that four of the five hijackers were Pakistanis, and hence the hijacking was a “Pakistani plot.” More importantly, Islamabad is distressed by the fact that the hijackers were driven out of Afghanistan, and could have entered Pakistan. Islamabad claims it has no information on the hijackers’ whereabouts, and even if they have entered Pakistan, it has no way of identifying them.

Afghanistan’s role, by contrast, was predictable. The Taliban made way for India to negotiate with the hijackers. But they also surrounded the plane with armored cars, and the Taliban militia were showing off their rocket launchers and Stinger missiles, which may have been preparations to fight off, if necessary, any Entebbe-style rescue operation the Indians might have attempted. Once the hijacking was resolved, the Taliban allowed the hijackers ten hours to clear out of Afghanistan. Although New Delhi expressed satisfaction at the way the Taliban organized the negotiations, the fact that the hijackers went scot free, and took along with them three Kashmiri terrorists, was damning, and it will prevent New Delhi from opening formal diplomatic channels with Kabul. The Taliban are aware that their harboring of terrorists, Afghanistan’s huge annual production of narcotics, and gun-running are major impediments to gaining recognition from big countries such as India, but the regime has shown no intent to give up that which props it up.

A geopolitical cauldron

There is little doubt that India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan have all developed major security problems. Afghanistan, following the Soviet invasion in 1979, has become virtually a terrorist training ground. Although Soviet Russia no longer exists as a nation, the Taliban regime, which lives by the sword, as well as by running drugs and guns, does not wish to throw out its “colleagues” and “beneficiaries.” As a result, terrorists belonging to various countries, all of which are Muslim-majority nations, have a safe haven in Afghanistan. These are mercenaries eager to lend their “expertise for a price” for “jihad” against any nation—be that India, China, Russia, Pakistan, or any of the Central Asian nations.

Sadly, the situation is not much different in Pakistan. Having controlled the mujahideen from their own soil against the Soviet Army invading Afghanistan, some in Pakistan have

become the patrons of many who today are hard-core terrorists. In addition, the ISI was involved in masterminding the emergence of the Taliban in 1994, and there have been reliable reports that Pakistani regulars, donning Taliban garb, had fought (including the use of aircraft) to wrest power from the Tajik-dominated militia belonging to Ahmed Shah Massoud and former President Burhanuddin Rabbani. In other words, the umbilical cord that ties ISI and the “jihadi terrorists” of Afghanistan is still quite strong.

There is yet another problem. Pakistani geopoliticians, like their counterparts in India, have little understanding of the potency of the “independent Kashmir” movement. Islamabad, in essence, will endorse without hesitation any attempt, fair or foul, democratic or terrorist, to create a problem for the Indian Army in Kashmir. Mercenaries, under ISI guidance, regularly enter the India-held part of Kashmir to engage in terrorist activities. Pakistan believes that by forcing the Indians to commit human rights violations in Kashmir, it will be able to weaken the Indian hold there. Islamabad believes that a massacre, of the size which the Israelis carried out against the Shatila and Sabra Palestinian camps in Lebanon in 1982, committed by the Indians someday, would tilt the scale decisively in their favor. Islamabad also believes that the drain of financial and human resources on New Delhi to maintain a semblance of peace in Kashmir, will eventually tell upon India’s economic health. For Islamabad, it is low-intensity, low-cost irregular warfare, waged to get back the territory. Moreover, the Pakistani Army’s eagerness to annex Kashmir, and get even with India, has increased multifold since India helped to bring Bangladesh into existence by severing East Pakistan from Pakistan in 1972.

India, at the same time, is cursed with a situation which cannot be improved in the foreseeable future. Although Kashmiris have long become tired of violence, their hatred toward the Indian Army has not ebbed. Many of them will cooperate with the terrorists to inflict injury on the Indian Army, and the Indians in general. In the Kashmir Valley, local Muslims who had lived in harmony with the Hindus for centuries, have driven the Hindus out of their homes during the last decade. These are all “successes” of the terrorists, and New Delhi has failed to reverse the tide.

History of the Kashmir dispute

The big issue, which has been highlighted by the latest hijacking, is the need to resolve the Kashmir dispute. At the present time, India occupies two-thirds of Kashmir territory, though much of it is the sparsely populated Buddhist-majority part of Ladakh bordering China. The so-called line of control, which has not changed over the last five decades, is considered by New Delhi a de facto international boundary. Pakistan, on the other hand, does not recognize it as such. Islamabad has not spelled out how much more Kashmir territory it must have to reach an agreement, but is demanding all of Kashmir. It

seems that former Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who was pushed out of power by a bloodless coup on Oct. 12, 1999, had reached some sort of arrangement vis-à-vis Kashmir with his Indian counterpart. But a border skirmish between India and Pakistan last summer, and the coup that ousted Sharif, weakened that initiative. The recent hijacking has put up yet another barrier to the resolution of the Kashmir dispute. Islamabad has already announced that it will not join the South Asian Free Trade Association of seven South Asian countries, and therefore there is nothing to talk about with India except Kashmir. India has reiterated its old position that it wants to resolve all outstanding issues, including Kashmir, with Pakistan. In other words, positions have hardened once again.

The problem is a big one. India was divided in 1947 under the British imposition of the “one country, two nations” theory, according to which India is one country, but has within it a “Hindu nation” as well as a “Muslim nation.” Pakistan was carved out because of the assumed validity of this theory. While Pakistan’s entire identity depended on it, few in India accepted the theory. India called itself a secular nation, and Pakistan is now an Islamic Republic. Indian political leaders, such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel, accepted the theory in 1947 in order to get the British out. Mahatma Gandhi did not accept it, but there was no plan to revisit the issue. Meanwhile, Hindu-Muslim riots, erupting from time to time, continued to inflict further damage. In 1972, when Bangladesh was born out of East Pakistan, India pointed out that the “Islamic bond” was only skin deep. New Delhi claimed then that that was the end of the “one country, two nations” theory. But, Pakistan had no way to accept this. The Kashmir issue, to both the Indians and Pakistanis, is yet another chapter from the same book. While the Indians cannot give up Muslim-majority Kashmir, because that would “justify” the “one country, two nations” theory, it is for the same reason, ironically, that Pakistan cannot give up Kashmir. Moreover, the Kashmir dispute keeps India at the center of Pakistan’s basic threat perception. This helps the old feudal order, and the Pakistani Army and the intelligence services, to continue ruling the country the way it has ruled for decades. It is a vicious circle, and both India and Pakistan are wholly within it.

Things have to change. If Kashmir continues to be a theater of death and mayhem, the international community will lose faith in India’s, and Pakistan’s, ability to resolve the issue bilaterally. In addition, with the passage of time, and continuation of violence, new scars have appeared, and some of them are quite deep. A time will come, and it is not too far off, when the entire world will tilt toward making Kashmir an independent nation. Pressure will mount on both India and Pakistan to accept such a solution. The hijacking, and the events that followed, indicate that neither Islamabad nor New Delhi is quite ready to deal with this.

British establishment admits, ‘Yes, we harbor terrorists’

by Mary Burdman

The British authorities and media have not considered it necessary to disguise London’s role as a command center for terrorist and separatist operations. Groups including the support apparatus for the Saudi terrorist kingpin Osama bin Laden, and militant Kashmiri separatists who have led a 10-year war which has killed some 25,000 people in the Indian subcontinent, work out of London with the full protection of the British authorities, as *EIR* has repeatedly documented.

In the wake of the terrorist hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane on Dec. 24, the British Foreign Office and its circle have even been aggressive in acknowledging Britain’s role.

“The fact is, that London has been the center of terrorist groups,” a stalwart of the British establishment candidly told a journalist on Jan. 5, when he was asked what initiatives the British Foreign Office or British government might be considering vis-à-vis the explosive situation on the Indian subcontinent.

Asked to elaborate, this figure, who is close to both the Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence, stated: “As with Kashmiri groups, for example: London is the center for many emigrés, who are the background to terrorist activity. What often happens, is that emigrés come here legitimately, stay for a while, then have children, who are British citizens, and who then become involved in international terrorism and planning, and guerrilla activity. The nominal problem becomes, that their presence here is seen as legitimate. As a result, much of the theory and planning for international terrorism is done here in London. Top people of bin Laden, for example, operate here quite openly.”

The establishment figure acknowledged that, at least “logically,” there is an argument to be made for a U.S. military attack on London, just as an attack was ordered on Sudan—this one, totally unjustified—by U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in August 1998, for allegedly abetting terrorist operations. It is also the case, this figure concurred, that London’s notoriety as a protector of terrorist groups is reinforcing the view that the British are *running* terrorism, for strategic and political reasons.

He has been agitating for some time, the man said, for