Managing a Crisis: 
The Hijacking of PK326: Pakistan/Afghanistan/Syria (March 1981) 
Media Aftermath and Beyond

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Why is this hijacking important?

• The hijacking of PK326 in March 1981 – lasting 13 days – was an important incident in Pakistan’s history, having been masterminded by Murtaza Bhutto, brother of the late Prime Minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto.

• Political, not financial demands, were involved in this hijacking.

• History tends to repeat itself: an incident that occurred nearly 32 years ago still has important lessons for today. My prescient dream (BBC World Service tape, December 29, 1999)

• One learns from life’s experience: it shapes and re-shapes our actions and responses.

• During 1999-2002, I did a half-dozen interviews on BBC, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), CBS, CNN, NBC, and Canadian Independent Television. What have I learned from those exchanges? Could I have acted differently?

• The power of photographic images. Bob Schieffer (CBS) tape, December 29, 1999
Why is the region where the hijacking occurred still center-stage?

• Afghanistan and Syria, where our hijacking was played out, remain two regions of conflict, but the tactics have changed – suicide bombings have become the ‘weapon of choice.’ What do we mean by terrorism?
  • Is it a targeted act against a particular person or persons, or against certain icons, OR
  • Is it a non-targeted incident designed to cause random loss of life?
• Any of us could become trapped in a similar situation. How does one prepare for it? What do we learn from it?
Four key questions

• Should one negotiate with the perpetrators of a hostage situation?
• If the answer is yes, ultimately, how long does one wait?
• Is the risk for hostages of dying from actions taken by a SWAT team greater than from actions taken by the perpetrators?
• Whom does one trust in such a situation? The Stockholm Syndrome -- the strange bonding when people face a common result: either we all survive or we all perish.
Evolution of hijackings and parallels among hostage situations (I)

• Research into hijackings: there have been nearly 200 hijackings since 1950, i.e. 63 years of hijackings. Reference Peter St. John’s book

• The first hijacking took place in March 1950, involving 3 aircraft hijacked in Czechoslovakia. In the early and mid-1970s, hijackings peaked, Cairo/Egypt, Amman/Jordan, Entebbe/Uganda, being among the most well-known.

• Major hijackings:
  • PIA flight 326 hijacked from Karachi to Kabul and Damascus (March 1981)
  • 1985 TWA flight hijacked to Beirut and Algiers, and back to Beirut
  • Air France flight hijacked by the PLO to Entebbe (1975). Benjamin Netanyahu’s brother, Yonatan, led the Israeli commando raid and he died in the rescue operation.
  • Indian Airlines flight, hijacked from Katmandu, Nepal to Kandahar, Afghanistan (December 1999).
  • Only the TWA incident and our PK326 incident lasted 2 weeks. All of the other hijackings were resolved in a few days or by the end of the first week.
Evolution of hijackings and parallels among hostage situations (II)

• 9/11 moved the world to a new level of danger.
  • 4 planes were hijacked, but the aircraft and the passengers became human missiles, they were not hostages in the way the term is commonly used. The nephew of a member of our ‘extended family’ died in the American Airlines plane that crashed into the Pentagon. Tom Brokaw (NBC) tape.

• Although the phenomenon of hijackings has clearly diminished in the last 10 years, there are parallels to any hostage situation, e.g. the Nairobi Westgate Mall incident in 2013. Features that are common to these two types of situations is that one faces threats from the perpetrators, but also from an indirect threat from a SWAT team botching its operation.
Evolution of hijackings and parallels among hostage situations (III): Triple Jeopardy

- Similarities and response mechanisms involved in hostage situations. The SWAT risk, the ‘do-nothing’ risk, the escalating risk.
- Incidents that take place in the air have the highest level of risk, because of the risk of a plane crash or of being shot down by Government planes.
- Fear and isolation combat the desire to do something, in my case triple jeopardy – Jewish, South African and a ‘Banker.’
- I was alone, with no colleagues to turn to. We, the 148 hostages, could not talk amongst ourselves. I felt even more isolated because most of the radio intercom commands and updates from the hijackers were in Urdu.
What Did the Bank do?

- Little the Bank could do, except to monitor the crisis on a 24/7 basis.

- Ernie Stern appointed Jim Theodores to monitor the crisis and recommend actions. Jim had recently returned to H/Q after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, and the Bank had to close its Kabul office. Jim had been the Res. Rep. in Kabul.

- Jim slept in his office most nights, waiting for any word about my safety. He manned the fax machine, there was no Internet and no cell phones.
PK 326: Understanding my timeline

- **March 1981**: Primary incident – hijacking of PK326
- **May 1991**: Assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in Madras
- **December 1999**: Hijacking of Indian Airlines, Kandahar
- **September 2001**: Destruction of the World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon, secondary incident for me.
- **And today** – a span of 33 years. Much has changed.
PK 326: The key players

3 HIJACKERS in control of the plane

AIRPORT CONTROL TOWERS communicated with the hijackers (in both Kabul and Damascus)

PAKISTAN INTERNATIONAL AIRLINES (PIA) tried to resolve the crisis

WORLD BANK PRESIDENT Robert McNamara gave go-ahead for contact with President Zia-Ul-Haq

PRESIDENT OF PAKISTAN Zia Ul-Haq had to work out a resolution, plan a response, and approve a deal
What did the World Bank do?
Stage 1

Management of information: Monitoring

- The Bank made key decisions on where to get reliable information.
  - **Formal/Direct**
    - Negotiators were sent to Kabul and Damascus by the Government of Pakistan.
    - Controllers in the airport control towers tried to maintain contact with the hijackers in the cockpit. I was seized at gunpoint to be the ‘communicator’ from the cockpit of the hijackers’ key demands.
    - Contact was made between the Bank and the Government of Pakistan, mainly at the ambassador level (in Damascus). Since Kabul was controlled by the Soviet Union, there were no Ambassadors there.
  - **Informal/Indirect**
    - Ground crew was allowed into the aircraft to deliver food and water.
    - Media (local and international media organisations, e.g., BBC) covered the story.
- Goal was to obtain the most accurate information possible on fast-moving developments, including physical conditions on the plane.

Hostages were released in stages, women and children first.
The Bank assessed the reliability of what little information emerged. It could do little else.

Jim Theodores had to sift through hard facts vs. propaganda. Reports were confusing regarding conditions on the plane.

Meanwhile, on Day 5 I had to watch (right in front of me) the execution of Lieutenant Tariq Rahim (Rahim had been aide-campe to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir Bhutto’s father, and he had given state evidence at Mr. Bhutto’s trial, which led to Mr. Bhutto’s conviction and hanging in 1979).

- After Rahim, I thought that I might be the next target.
- Instead, on Day 6 I was forced into the cockpit to write out and broadcast a key message from the hijackers to the Airport Control Towers in Kabul and New Delhi (the Indian Government was monitoring the situation closely).
- When my voice was heard for the first time on the cockpit radio, and my message was relayed to Mr. McNamara’s office (at the hijacker’s insistence it was addressed to Mr. McNamara), Bank management knew that I was under serious threat. This was communicated to my family.
- After my broadcast, I spent a half hour in the cockpit with the Lead hijacker, Alamgir, as he explained to me how much he despised Zia-Ul-Haq and how he had supported Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s Government. Alamgir did not mention the mastermind, Murtaza Bhutto (those allegations came out later).
What did the World Bank do?

Stage 3

- The Bank took concrete steps:
  - It maintained contact with the Government of Pakistan at many levels.
  - It also worked through the UN as the intermediary. The hijackers had confiscated my Laissez-Passer. Mr. McNamara dispatched to NYC Herbert Golsong (the Bank’s Chief Legal Counsel) so that he could meet with his counterpart at the UN. They agreed that Kurt Waldheim (UN Secretary-General) would call President Zia Ul-Haq to urge him to take all necessary measures to end our crisis.
  - It took Zia Ul-Haq 5 more days to agree to meet the hijackers’ demands, i.e., to release 54 political prisoners from Pakistani jails and arrange for a prisoner-hostage swap to be held on the Damascus runway. Yet my forced broadcast had mentioned 93 prisoners that the hijackers were insisting be freed from Pakistani jails. It turned out that the Government could not find the other 39 prisoners.
Managing the aftermath
The personal level (I)

• My Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSS) came on 10 years after my hijacking, triggered by the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in Madras in April 1991. He was the eldest son of Indira Gandhi and himself was the Prime Minister of India at the time.

• Why did my mind gravitate so much to Pakistan and India?
  • The similar tragedies of the Gandhi and Bhutto families propelled this. Indira Gandhi was shot by her bodyguard, and her eldest son, Rajiv Gandhi, the sixth Prime Minister of India, was assassinated by a woman associated with the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. I had worked on Bank projects in all four countries -- Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, four counties that had all grappled with political turmoil and violence, borne from a colonial past.
  • In May 1991 I was on mission in the Philippines, and it was there that I had my first onset of explosive dreams. My second bout of PTSS came after 9/11.
  • What did the World Bank do?
  • In the initial stage after my hijacking, I insisted on returning to work immediately. There was a fuss about my Board Presentation of the Pakistan SSI Project, just a few days after my return. We had yellow balloons at home, which helped me to put some distance from the incident. It took a few weeks more for my suitcase to arrive at home.
Ten years after my hijacking, the Bank approved my request for a 6-month leave of absence to write a book on the incident. It has never been published and I have not updated it since 1995.

Yet, I became obsessed with the story and got drawn into following every detail about incidents such as 9/11.

Even today, I am concerned about what might lie ahead, around some unsuspecting corner.

- Who could have predicted the destruction of the World Trade buildings in NYC and part of the Pentagon?
- The “H-walk.” On most flights before takeoff, I check out the faces of passengers, by walking the aisle. Sub-consciously, I am looking for Alamgir, even though I know that he was shot and killed by Afghan forces two years after our hijacking. Alamgir had returned from Damascus to Kabul. So had Murtaza Bhutto, who was formally convicted, in absentia, with masterminding the hijacking of PK326 and issuing the instruction to Alamgir that he should kill Tariq Rahim on board our flight. Reference the book that Homi Kharas gave me (The Terrorist Prince).
Managing the aftermath
The institutional level

- Large institutions, like the Bank, have poor memories.

- Much of the useful information is not codified anywhere. The Bank has good Guidelines, including for staff to use discretion about the national passport versus the Laissez-Passer, and to avoid the risk of carrying a prominent (identifying) briefcase.

- Research that I did by visiting ICAO in Montreal was conveyed to the Bank’s Security Department.

- I have played a role through word-of-mouth communication and giving talks at other venues. Today is just the 4th. time that I have done this type of presentation or talk. I will do more, no doubt.
The Role of the ICAO

- The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) in Montreal works closely with the airline industry. ICAO communicates mainly with governments and airlines.

- Airport security measures are governed by ICAO rulings, and the airlines provide advice.

- However, airline companies are caught between two concerns: improving safety and maintaining revenue. They do not want to alarm the travelling public.

- Some ICAO prescriptions
  - Keep rope in the cockpit (hijacking of a PanAm flight in Karachi)
  - Box cutters (9/11).
  - Stun guns in the cockpit and keeping the cockpit door locked.
  - Placing air marshals on board.

- There are different procedures for international flights versus domestic flights.
What can Organizations Do?

- Universities – and management schools – provide a useful forum in which to have informed discussions and steer relevant information back to the airlines. International organizations like the Bank have to focus on their main audience -- their staff.

- The University of Manitoba, University of Victoria, and University of Cape Town had invited me to do talks like the one today. I have only done four of these over 20 years since 1994.

- Governments come and go, but it is the institutional memory of good research that lasts.

- The information needs to be preserved in the appropriate forum. People get jaded -- even ‘9/11’ has become just a cliché to some.
Looking ahead

- Hijackings have become fewer, replaced by suicide bombings.
- But hijackings may not be a thing of the past.
- Could the London Underground bombing and the Madrid train bombing have been anticipated?
- Where might the next incident be? What form or shape might it take? Is the Washington Metro really secure? Are our shopping malls really secure -- aka the recent Nairobi Westgate Mall incident?
Some reflections

- These incidents can happen when least expected and can occur anywhere.
- Long lines at airport security are a bi-product of the times.
- One should keep to the major airlines, but note that they have also been the most visible targets for hijackers.
- Understanding the local politics that underlie a particular incident can help one to get over it. It helped me to know about the history of the Bhuttos and the Gandhis. Things fell into place.
- If one gets caught up in a dangerous situation or one witnesses a shocking incident, it helps to resume one’s daily life and activities as soon as possible.
- Reading about an incident is quite different to living through an incident.
- We learn best by exchanging information about such experiences.
Thank You and Questions