

# Hostages unlikely to be freed soon : Analyst

NEW DELHI, Dec 28 : The hijackers of an Indian Airlines plane are not likely to free the hostages soon, a defence expert said today, adding New Delhi had badly botched the handling of the crisis, reports AFP.

K. Subrahmanyam, a noted defence analyst and commentator who was part of a hijack management team in 1984 when a plane was held for 36 hours, told Star television channel the drama was not likely to end soon.

"It's very difficult to say but earlier hijackings have gone on for as long as 17 days," he said.

Subrahmanyam said negotiations to free the hostages would take time.

"It will take few rounds (of talks) at least," he said.

Indian negotiators held their first direct talks Monday with Muslim militant hijackers holding 160 hostages aboard the airliner in the southern Afghanistan town of Kandahar.

The hijackers, who took over the plane on Christmas Eve, explained their demands during

the talks, held through the control tower of Kandahar airport.

The hijackers have demanded the release of Maulana Masood Azhar, a Pakistani Islamic cleric arrested in India-administered Kashmir in 1994.

Subrahmanyam said the Indian government had mismanaged the hostage crisis, especially the public relations side.

"The government has not

handled it efficiently ... It should have started reassuring the families of those on board," he said.

"It should have been reassuring the people rather than fueling the anxieties of the people."

He said mounting public anger against what is being perceived as government apathy was based on the assumption the hostages would meet a bloody end.

The people in India should understand one thing -- the possibility of hostages coming to harm is not likely. In very few cases the hijackers harm the hostages physically ... (as)

they are an instrument to get something else."

When asked if Indian authorities had erred in letting the hijacked plane to take off from the northern Indian city of Amritsar -- where it was forced to land before going on to Lahore in Pakistan, Dubai and finally Afghanistan -- he was evasive.

"I don't have the full facts," he said, but added: "If we are lax and sloppy for 365 days, we are not going to get efficient in one day."

He said Indian authorities had to constantly be on their guard against such incidents.

"We are living next to a terrorist state," he said, referring to India's arch-rival Pakistan. "We must understand that Pakistan is there to hit us."

India says four of the hijackers are Pakistanis, and has identified them as Ahmed Sheikh, S.A. Qazi, Ibrahim Mistry and Syed Akhtar Syed.

Mistry is believed to be the brother of the Pakistani cleric whose release is being sought.



An airport security official belonging to religious Taliban militia provides water bottles to the hijackers for passengers inside the Indian hijacked plane at Kandahar Airport yesterday. — AFP photo

## BRIEFLY

**Plane crash kills 6 in Colombia:** Six Colombian soldiers travelling in a military plane that disappeared in the jungle bordering Panama likely were killed, a top air force official said Monday. AFP reports from Bogota.

Debris from the Turbo Commander-1000 was found Monday morning on a mountain near Bahia Solano, some 610 km northwest of the capital, General Luis Garcia said. The craft had disappeared from radar December 20 while on a flight between Medellin and Bahia Solano.

**Annan hails polls in Guinea-Bissau:** UN Secretary General Kofi Annan welcomed successful presidential and legislative elections in the West African country of Guinea-Bissau in a report published Monday. AFP reports from United Nations.

The elections, which took place November 28, constituted "an important step forward in the ongoing transition to democracy and the restoration of peace and normalcy," Annan said. The elections should pave the way for a return to democracy in the small Portuguese-speaking country after a coup in May 7 against president Joao Bernardo Vieira.

**12 killed as train hit truck in Delhi:** A speeding passenger train plowed through a truck carrying pilgrims in southern India, killing 12 people and injuring 29 others Monday, domestic news agencies reported. AP says from New Delhi.

The accident occurred as the truck tried to cross the track as the Coimbatore-Madurai Express train hurtled toward it at Idiappatti, a village in Tamil Nadu state, United News of India news agency reported. Three people were hospitalised in critical condition.

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