

Activity Sheet 2.3

Analysing the Media

Straw hard line on hostages

Jack Straw last night promised he will personally decide the asylum claims of more than 70 of the hostages who were aboard the hijacked Afghan Boeing 727 but warned that he wanted to see all those who were on the plane removed from Britain as soon as practicable.

Although home office sources last night were close to ruling out a forced return of any of the hostages to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, it is clear the home secretary believes the asylum claims are bound to fail because the hijacked plane started as an internal flight. Pakistan is a possible destination as a "safe third country" but officials indicated it will be difficult to persuade Islamabad to take the hostages.

Mr Straw's tough stance came in the face of accusations that the hijacking was an elaborate scam to claim asylum in Britain. But the home secretary was also warned by human rights groups that the Taliban regime's record of massacres, executions and amputations of political opponents meant he should give careful consideration to each case. It could take eight weeks to decide the fate of those hostages who apply for asylum but the process may drag on for months if cases become bogged down in repeated appeals.

Home office sources confirmed that there will be difficulties persuading a third country to take them and some lawyers may allege that Mr Straw's Commons statement prejudiced their legal cases.

"While I must act in accordance with the law. I am determined that nobody should consider that there can be any benefit to be obtained by hijacking," he told MPs.

"Subject to compliance with the legal requirements I would wish to see removed from this country all those on the plane as soon as practicable. This was an internal flight from Kabul to Mazer-e-Sharif, a small centre without any connections anywhere outside Afghanistan. In such circumstances it seems inconceivable that persons on the flight intended to claim political asylum unless of course they were complicit in the hijacking."



The 21 people arrested yesterday for being directly involved in the hijacking were yesterday being questioned by Essex police. Some face a life sentence in a British prison. The remaining 130 passengers were being cared for at the Stansted Hilton hotel across that road from the hijacked aeroplane. All are being treated as potential witnesses for any criminal prosecutions and police said there could be more arrests.

Sixty people and 14 of their dependants yesterday announced their intention to seek asylum. Another 72 of the passengers "have not yet made their wishes clear," the home secretary said.

A translator who had been assisting police with interviews at Harlow police station said: "Of the 11 people I spoke to, only one – a flight engineer – did not want to stay."

Police were still trying to establish whether the former passengers of the Ariana jet include family members of a 35-strong family who were reportedly on their way to a wedding in northern Afghanistan.

Sources said some of those arrested had been pointed out by other passengers. Others gave themselves up as members of the hijack team, which until yesterday was believed by police to number between six and 10. But some of those who identified

themselves with the hijacking may have done so because they believed it would be easier to claim asylum.

The 727 jet remained on the tarmac at Stansted last night and as undergoing forensic examination. Police found four handguns, one knuckle-duster, two grenades and two detonators on board.

Essex police were jubilant about the peaceful resolution of the hijacking crisis, the third major one at Stansted, London's designated hijacking airport since 1982.

Police negotiators were in almost constant contact with the hijackers since the plane arrived at Stansted at 2.01am on Monday.

About 190 people, including 15 crew, boarded the plane at Kabul at 5.30am, British time, on Sunday. The plane was hijacked shortly afterwards and taken to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Moscow, before leaving for London on Sunday night.

When the plane landed at Stansted, 164 people were on board. Before yesterday, 10 had been released by negotiation, and four crew, including the captain had escaped.

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