

Sikh hijacking started 'emotional roller-coaster'

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LAHORE, Pakistan (AP) — Nine young militant Sikhs who hijacked an Indian Airlines plane with guns, axes and a phony bomb surrendered unconditionally here yesterday after holding 255 hostages for nearly a day.

The hijackers were arrested and the hostages were returned to New Delhi.

Associated Press reporter Stephen Wilson was on board during the "20-hour emotional roller coaster," and filed the following story:

About 20 minutes into the flight, several Sikhs rushed up the aisle. In the blur, I spotted their 10-centimetre (4-inch) Kirpans — traditional warriors' daggers. One man fired a pistol to draw attention.

Some Sikhs ran down the aisles screaming slogans and slapping some passengers to terrify them. It worked.

They shouted slogans supporting Sikh autonomy in India's Punjab state and for Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the Sikh extremist who died in the Indian army assault on the Golden Temple in Amritsar in early June.

Some Sikhs stormed the cockpit, shooting Flight Engineer P.N. Mahajan, 54, in the lower back and stabbing him four times.

The pilot, Capt. C.S.P. Singh, said one man put a gun to his head

and demanded to be flown to Pakistan. "They kept saying, 'We will blow the plane to pieces,' said Singh, 53, a Sikh who does not wear a turban.

Condemning the army for the Golden Temple raid, they tore the stripes off the uniform of an Indian army colonel at my right.

After at first being refused permission to land in Lahore, we touched down at about 6:45 p.m. Indian time. Singh told the control tower he was running out of fuel and the hijackers were threatening to set off a bomb.

The next day, at about 10:30 a.m., at least three people fainted or found it hard to breathe. Two doctors were summoned to give them oxygen.

An hour later, a tall, intimidating Sikh spoke over the intercom in Punjabi.

"The Pakistan government is not co-operating. We will blow up the plane or set it on fire in five minutes," I was told he said.

Silence fell over the cabin. I prayed for the first time in a long while.

At 12:20 p.m., the same Sikh spoke again, and his words brought applause.

Their leader had left the plane to talk with a Pakistani official, I was told. Five minutes later he returned and announced we were to be freed.