

Hijackers head out of Karachi

SikhMuseum.com

KARACHI (Reuter) — A hijacked Indian airliner took off from Karachi early today after refuelling at its second stop in Pakistan after being commandeered by dagger-wielding Sikh separatists, a Government spokesman said.

The hijackers, numbering either six or 12 according to conflicting reports, have released seven hostages. There were 85 people aboard the Boeing 737 jetliner when it left Karachi.

The plane's destination was unknown, but the hijackers had demanded route maps for Dubai, Sharjah and Abu Dhabi and weather reports from the Persian Gulf.

A hydraulic problem delayed an earlier takeoff attempt. Airport sources said they did not know whether the problem had been dealt with.

In Lahore, the plane's first stop, the hijackers had threatened to kill the passengers and blow up the plane if it was not refuelled and allowed to take off for the United States. The aircraft stayed in Lahore for more than nine hours before flying to Karachi to take on more fuel.

An outlawed Sikh student group claimed responsibility for the hijacking, accusing the Indian Government of holding 28,000 Sikhs after a crack-down on separatists in north Punjab.

A crippled passenger freed in Lahore, Mohaish Kumardhar, said the hijackers were armed with two bombs and the daggers traditionally carried by Sikhs. The Pakistani spokesman said they were also believed to have at least two pistols.

The Indian Airlines twin-engine jet carried 86 passengers and six crew members when it was commandeered yesterday on a flight from Chandigarh to Srinagar in northwest India.

Five hostages — Mr. Kumardhar, his wife and child, and two Norwegian women — were released when the plane stopped in Lahore, just across the border into Pakistan. Two ailing Sikh women, one Indian and one British, were freed in Karachi.

After landing in Lahore, the hijackers made several demands, including the release of fellow Sikhs being held in Pakistani prisons for earlier hijackings. They threatened to kill the passengers one by one and then blow up the plane if their demands were not met, an airport official said. But the threats were not carried out.

India's Civil Aviation Minister, Kursheed Alam Khan, identified the leader of the hijackers as a Sikh in his 20s named Malawar Khan. He told Parliament that one of the men claimed to be a pilot, and had told authorities he would fly the Boeing to the United States himself.

Among the band's demands, airport authorities said, was the release of 14 Sikhs being held in Pakistan following two earlier hijackings of Indian aircraft to Pakistan, one seven weeks ago and one in 1981. They also demanded the creation of an independent Sikh nation in Punjab.

Pakistani authorities finally allowed the aircraft to leave Lahore.