



INDIA'S WORLD

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS • INDIAN INTERESTS

January 3, 2025

THE IRAQI INVASION OF KUWAIT: AMBASSADOR K. P. FABIAN, INDIA'S THEN LEAD DIPLOMAT, RECALLS OPERATION AJAY

Ankit Tiwari

THE IRAQI INVASION OF KUWAIT: AMBASSADOR K. P. FABIAN, INDIA'S THEN LEAD
DIPLOMAT, RECALLS OPERATION AJAY



As Prime Minister Narendra Modi landed in Kuwait for a historic bilateral visit (the first by an Indian PM in more than four decades), we sat down with Ambassador K. P. Fabian to discuss Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2nd of August 1990, which kickstarted the first major international crisis in the post-Cold War era.

As Joint Secretary (Gulf) at the time, Amb. Fabian coordinated Operation Ajay, which facilitated the repatriation of 1,76,000 Indian nationals from Kuwait and remains the largest evacuation ever undertaken in aviation history.

Understandably, the safety of its large diaspora in Kuwait was a key driver in India's approach to the Gulf Crisis and Delhi's objectives were

aided by its decision not to “condemn” Saddam Hussein’s invasion, despite considerable international pressure at the time.

In a candid interview, Amb. Fabian recalls the mammoth evacuation effort.

Thank you so much, Ambassador Fabian, for this interview. Perhaps we can start with a little bit about yourself and your storied career as an Indian diplomat.

Thank you. Always a pleasure to talk to you. Now, about myself, well, I hail from Kerala, and I joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1964. I went to Iran in 1976-79, so I saw the Shahenshah (Mohammad Reza Pahlavi – the Former Shah of Iran) at the zenith of his glory and his subsequent downfall. In 1990, I was Joint Secretary (Gulf) when President Saddam Hussein decided to have a picnic in Kuwait. Finally, I retired as Ambassador to Italy, where, in Rome, I was also India’s Permanent Representative to the UN.

What was India’s reaction to Saddam Hussein’s actions in 1990? Why did India not condemn the Iraqi invasion?

When it happened, we came up with a statement where we categorically stated that Iraq should withdraw and the territorial integrity of Kuwait should be restored. But we didn’t use the word “condemn” because if we condemned Saddam Hussein publicly, then we wouldn’t be able to talk to him. We wanted to get our people out and also help negotiate for a diplomatic solution to end the crisis. If

you have to talk to somebody, you don't condemn them publicly. That is diplomacy.

From an Indian perspective, when we look back at the Gulf Crisis, the 'Airlift' clearly stands out in our collective national memory. How was Operation Ajay conceived, organised, and carried out?

Well, after he met Foreign Minister I. K. Gujral, Mr. Saddam Hussein agreed to facilitate the repatriation of Indian nationals. Afterward, we went to Kuwait and met with Ambassador A. K. Budhiraja. He told us that a couple of thousand people were waiting to see Mr. Gujral but advised that the Minister should not go out there since it could be dangerous. The people were very angry, which is understandable because we could only arrive on the 13th-14th of August, and according to them, we had not done anything to help them thus far.

So the Foreign Minister asked for our view, and both my boss, Mr. Inder Pal Khosla, who was then Additional Secretary to the MEA, and I told him, "Sir, we have come to see our people. So we should go there." There was no podium, nothing, and Mr. Gujral, being very enthusiastic, got onto the bonnet of the jeep, although he was 70 years old at that time, and delivered a speech. Well, within four minutes, Gujral made them chant, "Bharat Mata Ki Jai," reassured them and asked them to cooperate with the authorities. Now, that was diplomacy at its best.

Anyway, so let me come to the evacuation by air. How did we do it? What happened was that somewhere in Bangalore, an accident had

occurred, and some three hundred and twenty Air India planes were grounded, subject to an investigation. At the time, Surface Transport Minister K. P. Unnikrishnan correctly argued that it is a different matter whether it is a case of bribery or not, but the planes should be used for evacuation.

We asked the Cabinet Secretary to create a Cabinet Subcommittee, chaired by Mr. Gujral, where Finance, Railways, Home, and all concerned ministries were represented. I asked to be the secretary for the subcommittee, and my game was to have as much control over the agenda as possible. Anyway, the coordination between our ministries/agencies was fantastic, particularly between the MEA and the Civil Aviation Ministry, which also eliminated the need to make notes and move paper around. In any case, we had no time.

In the mornings, I would get a call from the Air India manager in Amman (Jordan), and back then, we had no cell phones, so he would just say, "Good morning, Sir. 3,500 [people]." Immediately, I would use the intercom and tell the Civil Aviation Secretary, "Sir, good morning. 3,500." He would reply, "Yes, Fabian." That was it. I never had to worry whether Air India would send enough aircraft on time or not. There was no need to check. It would be done. At the time, we didn't even sign a contract with Air India because there was no time and there was no need.

Do you recall any anecdotes from this period, Ambassador? Did you fly out to Amman yourself?

Yes, I went to Amman after two weeks. We stayed at the Grand Hotel there, and one morning, an Air India manager, Manuel, also from Kerala, came to me with a very long face. I asked him, what happened? Well, the crew and the pilots had walked out on him. Why? The passengers were very late.

Now, it was not their fault. Our people were put up in schools and other buildings far away from the airport and would travel by bus, which could be stopped by any Jordanian policeman. The policeman, who doesn't know English, would walk into your bus and take your passport, look at your face and the passport photograph three or four times. If he does it for seventy people, they will be late. Therefore, the crew would have to wait and work beyond the stipulated number of hours.

So, the poor manager asked me to speak to the pilot and the crew. However, I concluded that the situation needs lateral thinking. I called up Firdaus Khergamwala, who was a highly respected correspondent for The Hindu, based in Bahrain. Incidentally, he was in the Foreign Service earlier but was a little disappointed and went back to the media. We were good friends, so I asked Firdaus a favour, "I want you to carry a story."

"What's the story?"

"We are facing a national emergency and Air India has risen up to the occasion. They work maybe ten hours, fifteen hours, and sixteen hours nonstop. They couldn't care less."

So he laughed and asked, “Fabian, is this true?”

Candidly, I told him it is not true now, but it will be true tomorrow if you carry the story. He hesitated, but I told him that he could quote, verbatim, a Joint Secretary to the Government of India.

Well, the next day, Manuel came to me with a big smile. “Sir, I have to tell you something. The crew has told me there’s no problem.” I asked, “What happened?” and he told me that there was high praise for them in the media and in an urgent meeting of the pilots’ and crew guild/association yesterday night; they decided to go the extra mile, given the publicity. I did not tell him what I had done, but it worked!

Given the scale and emergency nature of Operation Ajay, there must have been many hurdles and challenges.

Of course, there were lots of small problems that would require creative solutions.

In Amman, our people told us that they could not get bottled water. Apparently, they were huddled up with Filipinos, and young women would flirt with the security guards to get more than their share of bottles. I called our Ambassador, Ranjit Sethi, at that time, and I told him I want to talk to your boss (by that, I meant his wife). Since Mrs. Sethi was the President of the Indian Women’s Association, she could control funds on the spot and she said, “Fabian, you will get your water in thirty minutes or maybe thirty-five minutes.” We also shared our water bottles with the Filipinos.

My point is that we worked together. You didn't have to argue your case. For instance, we had to send food to Kuwait by ship. There was a blockade, but our Permanent Representative at the UN got us the Security Council's permission and informed us. Within ten minutes, the Chief Secretary at the Shipping Corporation of India called me and agreed to make arrangements. They must have loaded ten thousand items within twenty-four hours. Now, I forgot to tell him that the MEA would bear the cost. I called again, and he said, "Fabian, forget about it." Later, I wrote to him and called him again, but he said, "Fabian, I told you to forget about it. Now, why are you wasting my time?"

One last thing. We took a decision that the evacuation would be gratis. No question that anyone would be charged. Whether you were poor or rich, to get you back to safety was the Indian government's responsibility.



Ankit is a Research Associate at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research and an Editorial Associate at India's World magazine.