

ORAL HISTORY

Biggest Ever Air Evacuation in History

K.P. Fabian, former Ambassador of India to Qatar, to Finland and to Italy, was head of the Gulf Division of the Ministry of External Affairs during the First Gulf War that began with the Iraqi forces crossing into Kuwait on 2 August 1990 and lasted until they were expelled on 27 February 1991. He coordinated the repatriation of over 176,000 Indians. Recognised as the biggest ever air evacuation in history, it was achieved against many odds. Ambassador Fabian discusses the event.

Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ): Thank you for agreeing to speak to us on an important event in India's diplomatic history – the biggest ever evacuation by air of over 176,000 Indian citizens from Kuwait.

Iraqi forces moved into Kuwait on 2 August 1990. Iraqi claims on Kuwait were historical but that Iraq would take unilateral action of this nature was unexpected. In 1989, after your return from Helsinki, you had taken charge of the Gulf Division in the MEA, as Joint Secretary. Would you like to share your views on the Iraqi, and Kuwaiti, behaviour before 2 August 1990?

K.P. Fabian (KPF): Thank you for including me in the Oral History project. The project is important, as otherwise significant parts of history might be lost in the realm of oblivion. In any case, it is a pleasure for me to share my experience on such an important matter with *IFAJ*.

Before going into the airlift part of it, I must highlight that the Iraqi claim on Kuwait is indeed very old and it is well documented; successive Iraqi governments had laid claims on Kuwait. There were signals from Saddam Hussein about his intentions but, by and large, these were ignored. At the same time, it should also be recognized that Hussein did what he did not only to assert a territorial claim but for other reasons as well – though these turned out to be grossly wrong.

After the end of the Iraq-Iran War (1980–1988), Iraq was financially in a perilous state. It had received large sums of money from its neighbours, including Kuwait. Hussein assumed that Iraq fought for the Arabs and the money he was loaned was not expected to be returned. Kuwait, given the traditional tension between the two, had a different view. Hussein tried to maximize his revenue by selling crude at as high a price as possible. Kuwait increased its production and thwarted this move; it also took to pumping more oil than before from the common wells at Rumeila. This also infuriated Saddam.

Before the war with Iran, Iraq had reserves worth US\$ 40 billion; at the end of it Iraq was indebted for \$ 80 billion. Hussein believed that Kuwait was determined to ruin Iraq financially and he wanted to teach his neighbour a lesson.

I had gone to Kuwait in July 1989 for a joint commission meeting related to civil aviation. The massing of Iraqi troops on the Iraqi side of the border had started, but we were not told about it during the meeting. The Kuwaiti Minister for Civil Aviation told us about it at the VIP lounge at the airport, a few minutes before the return flight, but added that there was not much to worry about it. We were in close contact with the Indian community and they were also of the view that there would be no invasion: perhaps they were influenced by the official Kuwaiti perception.

When Iraqi troops marched into Kuwait on 2 August 1990, the first intimation I got was from a friend whose husband was a UN official in Kuwait. She was staying close to the American Cultural Center there. Around 6.30 in the morning (Delhi time), she called me to say that the Iraqi troops were there and that she could see them on the streets from her apartment. Less than an hour later, our Ambassador in Kuwait, Arun Buddhiraja, called me to confirm the news.

When the Iraqi troops were moving towards Kuwait, General Norman Schwarzkopf, sitting in his Central Command (CENTCOM) Headquarters in Florida, was somewhat surprised. A few days earlier, CENTCOM had started a simulation exercise that envisaged Iraqi troops storming into Kuwait. He was in the middle of this exercise and was surprised that the real invasion was already taking place. He was getting two sets of reports – on the real movement of the troops and from the simulation exercise. Significantly they were identical.

There was a good reason why CENTCOM had undertaken the simulation exercise. In early 1990, when Schwarzkopf took over as Chief of CENTCOM, its war doctrine was mainly meant to take care of Soviet invasion of Kuwaiti oil fields and Saudi Arabia; but the Soviet Union had now disintegrated. The new scenario he devised and got approved was an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Subsequently, he went round the Gulf, sensitizing the Gulf rulers about the possibility of an Iraqi invasion.

So, I believe the Americans were not really surprised when they learnt about the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. I would go one step further and assert that the US wanted Iraq to invade Kuwait. On 25 July, the US Ambassador April Glaspie called on President Saddam Hussein and conveyed that she was under

instructions from the US President to seek improvement in US-Iraq relations; and that the US did not take a specific view on intra-Arab relations, implying that Iraq's differences with Kuwait were not of much concern to the US. A week before the invasion, Margaret Tutwiler (spokesperson for the Department of State) and John Kelly (Assistant Secretary) declared that the US was in no way obligated to come to the defence of Kuwait if it were attacked. Saddam Hussein interpreted these signals to mean that he could invade Kuwait and get away with it.

I went to Kuwait after its liberation. I met the Chaldean Archbishop who told me that the Glaspie conversation of 25 July was not what it seemed and that the Americans were taking Iraq for a ride! He had desperately tried to get in touch with Saddam Hussein to tell him that the Americans were deceiving him, but failed to get access. I also checked out this matter with a very senior level Iraqi foreign office official when he visited India later. I specifically asked him whether they did not know that Iraq could not have got away with it. He told me that they knew, but had no way of conveying it to their President effectively. If Hussein did not want to hear something, nobody dared to tell him that as it risked imprisonment or even death.

IFAJ: It was also reported that, in addition to not warning Iraq to stay out of Kuwait, the US ordered the carrier battle group under USS *Independence* to sail out of the Persian Gulf. These orders were not changed even after the last round of negotiations between Iraq and Kuwait failed.

KPF: That's right. To complete the deception, the day before the invasion the US even agreed to extend technical assistance of about \$4 million to Saddam. Why did the US want to see Iraq invade Kuwait? My belief is that the US had been wanting for years to have a military presence in Saudi Arabia and an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait would compel Riyadh to agree to a large US military presence on its soil.

After having moved in, it was true that Saddam Hussein wanted to withdraw. King Hussein of Jordan took a lot of trouble to convene a conference on 5 August to compel or convince Iraq to withdraw. However, by that time the Americans had decided that there should be no negotiated resolution of this conflict and that there would be military intervention. After the American troops reached Saudi Arabia, in small numbers, Iraq had withdrawn a brigade back to Iraq. But Hussein was again naïve, expecting to sit down with President Bush "one-to-one" and negotiate a solution to the "Palestinian problem". He thought that the Americans were in a predicament and that they would not take military action against him.

Our (late) colleague Nina Sibal, then in our Mission in Cairo, had sent us an anonymous opinion piece from the newspaper *Al-Ahram*. Its argument was that Saddam Hussein was making a big military mistake – instead of remaining in Kuwait he should have moved towards Eastern Saudi Arabia, to get hold of some more oilfields and sit tight there and then offer to negotiate. I asked her to find out the authorship of the opinion piece and she replied that it was the former Chief of Staff of the Egyptian Army who at that time was advisor to the Egyptian President. The Americans did need time to assemble a sizable force in Saudi Arabia. Militarily speaking, if Iraq had moved into Eastern Saudi Arabia also, Hussein could have been in a stronger position.

Days after the invasion, Secretary of Defence Dick Cheney and Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf went to Saudi Arabia to persuade them to accept the American forces on their soil, in sufficient numbers, to be able to evict Saddam from Kuwait. The Saudi King was initially reluctant. The Americans exhibited some satellite pictures showing deployment of Iraqi troops towards Saudi Arabia as well. In fact, some pictures showed Iraqi tanks inside Saudi territory. Saddam would not have knowingly put his tanks in Saudi territory. The King agreed to US troops coming in, not to liberate Kuwait, but primarily to protect the Kingdom from Hussein's attack, about which Cheney gave questionable evidence.

In fact, if Saddam had such an intention he could have gone into Saudi Arabia before the US build-up. I believe that establishing a sizable military presence in the Gulf, especially in Saudi Arabia, was a long-term American foreign and defence policy objective and this was being achieved.

IFAJ: You have graphically described the US interest in locating US troops on the ground in Saudi Arabia. Saddam moves into Kuwait on 2 August, the Americans are talking to the Saudis on 5–6 August and in just two days they wrap up the arrangements to station troops! On 8 August, the US troops start arriving. In other words, the first batch of the American troops were on the ground in less than a week.

KPF: Yes, that is true. Put graphically, the guest arrived for dinner even as the invitation card was on its way!

IFAJ: How closely was the Indian diplomatic establishment following these rapidly changing developments? Did they come to you as a surprise?

KPF: Our Embassy in Kuwait did not tell us that an invasion was imminent, nor did our Embassy in Baghdad. In the Ministry – or at least at my level – we were not exactly anticipating an invasion. We thought that Hussein would try to threaten Kuwait, that he wanted more money and recognition of his pre-

eminence. He had much contempt for Kuwait.

IFAJ: On 2 August, when confirmation of the invasion came from our Ambassador in Kuwait, how did you and the Government react?

KPF: Immediately after I received first intimation of the event, I rang up my immediate boss Additional Secretary (Political) I.P. Khosla, Foreign Secretary Muchkund Dubey, and Foreign Minister I.K. Gujral.

The immediate next step was to draft a statement conveying our views and apprehensions. Uppermost in our mind at that moment was the plight of our people. In that statement, we called upon Iraq to withdraw. Iraq's action of invading a sovereign state was definitely a violation of international law.

We did not use the word "condemn" in our statement, for two reasons: one, we were concerned about our nationals there; second, we still believed that there was some scope for a negotiated solution to the problem. We were keen to play a role. If we condemned the development openly, it would have been difficult for us to deal with Iraq.

We came under much criticism from the Americans for this mild reaction. At a reception in the American Embassy in Delhi that evening, the American Ambassador was highly critical of our statement. He made a few specific points. Interestingly enough, a number of Indians attending that party also made identical points to me.

IFAJ: When was the decision to evacuate taken and how did it proceed?

KPF: Members of Parliament from Kerala were the most agitated, as the majority of Indians in Kuwait were from their state. They started a *Dharna* (a protest) in front of Parliament House demanding that urgent steps be taken to get the Malayalees out of Kuwait.

Meanwhile, another problem was brewing. One set of Air India crew was stranded in Kuwait, having flown in a flight earlier. The Air India pilots and staff threatened that unless we got this crew out, they would ground the flights. The threat was indeed serious.

It was decided that the Foreign Minister should go to Baghdad and Kuwait and urgently arrange repatriation of our nationals. Additional Secretary I.P. Khosla and Minister I.K. Gujral went to Amman from Europe, where they were visiting, and I joined them there from Delhi. I flew by an Indian Air Force aircraft (IL 76) with some communication equipment. (That equipment came in handy later. Before the war started – and after our Mission was closed down, we got some young men to use the equipment and keep us informed. Later, we lost touch with them.)

We first landed in Baghdad and the Iraqis treated us very well. Our Ambassador (Kamal Bakshi) received and briefed us. In addition to meeting others, we were also scheduled to meet President Saddam Hussein, but as per their practice (amidst the usual paranoia about the security of the President), their protocol could not tell us when he would meet us. While we were elsewhere meeting others, the Embassy suddenly informed us that the President was waiting for Minister Gujral. I was not with the Minister and it was not logistically feasible for me to join the delegation to the meeting with Saddam. I was carrying a letter from our Prime Minister for President Saddam Hussein, and hence the letter was not delivered at that meeting.

The meeting took place in a cordial manner. Much has been said and written about “Saddam’s embrace” of our Minister. There is no merit in this criticism. Saddam Hussein, as a matter of local custom, just came and embraced the Minister. One cannot “duck” an embrace from a Head of State: it is a question of courtesy and manners.

The meeting went off very well. We conveyed our official viewpoint and also our plans to evacuate our nationals. He listened to our views and repeated his known position, and agreed to facilitate the repatriation of our nationals.

IFAJ: What happened after the meeting with President Hussein?

KPF: From Baghdad we flew into Kuwait. There, our Ambassador (Budhiraja) told Minister Gujral that a few thousand Indians were waiting for him and that they were very angry. He advised that he should not meet them and that the accompanying officials could do so.

Their anger was understandable. We had arrived in Kuwait on 14 August, twelve days after the invasion had taken place. They were right in expecting that their government should rush to their assistance. Our citizens abroad are entitled to assistance of our government in times of need and consular protection at all times. It is part of India’s sovereign obligation to protect them. Minister Gujral consulted us and we suggested that he should not postpone the meeting as our purpose of going there was to meet our people, assuage their feelings and help them.

At the place where the Indian community had assembled, there was no stage or podium or even a raised platform. So Minister Gujral stepped onto a chair and climbed onto the bonnet of a jeep! The assemblage was really angry, and remained hostile even after he started to speak. But in less than three minutes Minister Gujral made them shout “Bharat Mata Ki Jai” (Victory to Mother India). This was indeed a remarkable feat, not fully recognized by the media or the general public. Of course, he advised that we need to cooperate

with the authorities – whoever was in power – as the matter was very sensitive and we needed their assistance to organize the repatriation. The need to work with the Iraqi authorities in Kuwait was explained to them as a necessity to ensure that the evacuation was smooth and successful. We explained that necessary steps were being taken and evacuation would commence very soon.

In the evening the Indian community hosted a big dinner. The point was raised that a few of them could travel in our aircraft. This gained some currency and we decided that we could take a few.

Our Ambassador said that since he had to remain there, he did not want to be involved in the selection. We had seven phone lines in the Embassy premises. At any given point of time, at least six people were trying to talk to me over those lines. Finally we decided that we would make lists of those who wished to leave and ask them to assemble at the hotel where we were staying and we would make a judicious selection.

Meanwhile, another problem was brewing. Many individuals, mostly from the Punjab, went directly to the Minister and begged him to “reserve” one or two seats for them. They made him write “one seat” or “two seats” on their visiting cards and brought them over to me. When I saw the first few, I thought we could oblige, though we needed to take equally deserving people without such recommendations. As I started getting more such requests, I got worried.

I went to Minister Gujral and told him that this would give rise to avoidable problems as these people were essentially wealthy, healthy and were all men. My suggestion was that we needed to first pick up mothers with babies, other children, women, sick and old people. And also, on the basis of some kind of distributive justice, we needed to select people from every region. He asked me what we should do. I told him, since he could not just say ‘No’, he might continue to sign these cards, but it needed to be understood between us that the signed cards would not alter the selection process. So, he went on to sign a few more. When the persons concerned came to me, I told them that we would get back to them and that we would try our best to arrange something.

Subsequently, we contacted various community associations and told them to make shortlists of those who were old, sick, of women, children, etc. We got those lists and invited those on the list to the hotel. I read out the names in the list but nobody from the Embassy was there to assist as they did not want to be involved in this process. Some individuals who were not on

our list got angry.

To my utter embarrassment, an elderly person came and fell at my feet. He explained that he was on medication and that the medicine was not available anymore. While I was sympathetic to his condition, I could not openly accede to his request, lest I offend others, or worse, more people used that route to jump the queue. I whispered into his ears that I was going to reject his request, loudly for others to hear, but he would be taken – which I did.

There was another young tourist from Bangalore, a lawyer by profession, who came and shook my hand from across the railing and told me that he wanted to be included in the list by showing his visiting card signed by Minister Gujral. (I had requested Minister Gujral not to be present during this selection process, and he had kindly agreed.) I told him that it was very difficult – especially as he was young and fit and could await the regular repatriation airlift. He refused to let go of my hand unless I agreed to take him along. I then used an old and tested trick of my childhood. I suddenly said, “Hey, look above” ... he looked above and I pulled back my hand.

There were far more people than the number we could accommodate. We somehow managed to get the selected people on board. There was no checking by the immigration staff. The people just walked in.

As we reached Delhi, an issue cropped up. Some of the evacuees were carrying gold, but did not have money to pay the duty, if so warranted. Before boarding, some of the passengers at Kuwait airport had wanted me to disallow the carriage of gold by others. I had declined to interfere. Upon reaching Delhi, I requested the Ministry of Finance that these people might be allowed to leave their gold in lockers at the airport while arranging the duty amount, but the Ministry did not agree. These people had to somehow arrange the payment. To my mind, the Finance Ministry was unnecessarily difficult. My idea was that if they did not want to import the gold, the owners could take it out of India as they rebuilt their lives.

We also had an emerging PR problem. The military aircraft did not have the standard drill and the cabin crew to regulate the de-boarding. The first half dozen people to get down from the aircraft were naturally very healthy looking men – after all, those who were fit could get out faster and those who needed help, like the sick, women and children were taking their time. So the story that we had brought people who did not need any help started spreading.

IFAJ: After returning from Kuwait you had to make necessary arrangements for the repatriation and airlift was the only available option. How did you go about planning this massive exercise?

KPF: We decided that the only way to get our people out was through airlift. A very small number of people did come back by boats and other means. To arrange all this, a Cabinet Sub-Committee was formed, consisting of representatives of External Affairs, Civil Aviation, Finance and Defence Ministries. Minister Gujral chaired it. Normally, a Cabinet Sub-committee is serviced by the Cabinet Secretariat. T.N.R. Rao, Additional Secretary in the Cabinet Secretariat, was very cooperative and I, as Joint Secretary in the Gulf Division of the MEA, started preparing the agenda and the minutes, of course with Minister Gujral's approval. I.P. Khosla supervised. The Cabinet Secretariat was fully kept in the picture. We did not have to go through the normal time-consuming channels and it did help.

The important thing was that thanks to the excellent rapport between the MEA and Civil Aviation Ministry, we did not waste time in routine writing of notes. For example, if there was a message from our Embassy in Amman that there were four thousand evacuees, all that I had to do was to make a call to the Secretary or the Joint Secretary concerned in the Civil Aviation Ministry. I could be sure that the necessary number of planes would leave in hours. The Secretary, Civil Aviation, Mr. Ganesan, deserves our thanks for his speedy reaction to our various requests.

IFAJ: Surely, an exercise of this magnitude must have given rise to a host of problems. The flying crew must have also had some issues as they would not have been used to such an unorthodox operation.

KPF: Of course there were serious operational and human interest issues and problems at the other end. Let me narrate one such case. Our people were put up in schools or other buildings in different parts of Amman. They had to traverse long distances in uncertain conditions and it could never be predicted when they would reach Amman airport. The flights were invariably delayed and the crew had to put in longer than permitted duty hours.

I was having breakfast at the hotel in Amman one day, when the Air India Manager came to me with a disturbed look and said that there were serious problems due to delay in passengers' arriving for particular flights. The previous night, he said, passengers took a long time to reach the airport and the flight was unduly delayed. The crew was unwilling to fly as the time taken for the wait and the flying time to Bombay would take them beyond the stipulated hours of their duty. The Manager wanted me to talk to the crew, to avoid such problems in the future.

I knew that my talking would not help as the crew had a genuine problem. The matter required lateral thinking. Instead I telephoned (the late) Firdaus

Khergamwala, an ex-1969 batch Foreign Service officer, who had left the service and had joined *The Hindu* as its special correspondent at Bahrain. He was one of the most respected correspondents in the area and his despatches used to be widely read during those troubled times. I asked him for a favour – to carry a news story about “the excellent work being done by Air India and its crew”. I told him that the airlift was being done on a war footing and that Air India crew and other members were doing such a “wonderful job that they could be an inspiration for all of us”. He asked me if it was really happening. I told him that it was not happening then, but would become true if he carried such a story! I asked him to mention me by name so that he should not get into trouble on my account.

Early next morning, the Air India Manager came to me again, with a big smile, saying that there were no more problems! The pilots’ guild/associations had a meeting in Bombay the previous night and on seeing that there was good media coverage of Air India, they had decided to go the extra mile to keep up the good name.

I recall another incident, when one Mr. K.T.B. Menon called me on 2 August, saying that if finances were the problem he would pay for the air passage of any Indian who wished to leave. “KTB” was the richest Indian in Kuwait. His generosity touched us. He is no more and I do not know whether the Government honoured him for his gesture.

We had to take the help of many officers from MEA and other Ministries also, who were deputed to various parts of the Gulf, to liaise with our people and the local authorities and ascertain their requirements and assure them of our help if needed. The way some of these young officers went about their job was inspiring. Rajan Medhekar was one of them.

I must also mention that given the unsettled conditions in Kuwait, we had sent food items by sea. We also shared it with the nationals of other countries who were stranded there. One such group was those from Vietnam. The Government of Kerala had arranged for it – that was done on just a phone call, with the confirmatory written communications sent well thereafter.

IFAJ: Many agencies of the Government of India would have been involved in this mammoth exercise. Did it all go as planned?

KPF: In a majority of cases, but not always. Corrective action was put in place whenever necessary, with minimum delay.

The exercise went off smoothly basically because of the excellent rapport between the Ministry of Civil Aviation and MEA. At that time, the likely scale of the operation was not clear. We did not know how many would decide to

come out and also whether it might be necessary to repatriate our people in the rest of the Gulf as well. However, the government was determined to carry out the evacuation process irrespective of the scale or the cost. Once the mechanism of a Cabinet Sub-Committee was established, we could quickly cover various statutory requirements – like finance, etc., with minimum delay.

Of course, it did not go exactly as per the plan every time. As I said earlier, the passengers were reaching late: it was not their fault. The airlift was taking place from Amman: Baghdad was closed, Iran was out of bounds and the situation was tense. People had to come from Kuwait to Amman through Iraq – quite a distance and beset with problems.

Even after reaching the camps in Jordan, there were problems. On the way to the airport from these camps, they were regularly stopped by the Jordanian police. The police did not know English. They used to take the passport and match the photograph “ten times” with the person’s face. It used to take a lot of time. Our Embassy requested for persons knowing Arabic to assist in the process. We suggested to them to arrange local young English-speaking college students, preferably girls, to help. This way the problem was sorted out.

Then there was acute shortage of drinking water. The Indian Women’s Association in UAE, whose head was Ambassador Ranjit Sethi’s wife, helped in supplying thousands of bottles of water and other essential items. In addition to our massive exercise, many other countries with sizable populations were also carrying out similar exercises. Ours being the biggest, they were closely watching our plans and, perhaps, taking lessons.

IFAJ: What was the total number of people evacuated?

KPF: Approximately 176,000. We were determined to evacuate anyone who wanted to be evacuated.

Interestingly, on 14 August, the day our team arrived in Kuwait, there was a Pakistan Airline crew also stranded in Kuwait. Word came to us that they wished to be evacuated in our aircraft. As a humanitarian gesture, we agreed. We later learnt that the Pakistani Mission advised them against accepting Indian assistance.

There was yet another interesting case. A very senior American executive of Indian origin found himself stranded when the Iraqis descended into Kuwait and he went into hiding, for obvious reasons. He personally approached us for help. We gave him a temporary Indian passport and he came to Delhi with that travel document. Within three days thereafter, he was able to obtain a duplicate American passport from the US Embassy in Delhi and leave India.

In our assessment, there was, in fact, no danger to our people beyond Iraq and Kuwait. We had taken the US officials into confidence to ensure that our flights were not mistakenly targeted.

IFAJ: How long thereafter did our Mission in Kuwait continue to function?

KPF: Our Mission was there, as far as I can remember, as long as the evacuation exercise was on.

IFAJ: The evacuation continues to remain the biggest airlift in history and some idea of the magnitude would be useful in appreciating it. How long was this evacuation process? Can you give us some idea of the number of flights, the duration of the exercise, etc.?

KPF: The exercise lasted from 13 August to 11 October 1990, involving almost five hundred flights.

Here was an interesting development well after the airlift was completed. After the operation, when Air India, through the Ministry of Civil Aviation presented the bill, our Finance Division initially asked the usual questions but some of which were “unusual”. One such question was settled when we were able to convince Finance that there was no way we could have asked for an estimate and got it vetted by Finance before starting the operation.

IFAJ: After the completion of the evacuation process, the next logical step would have been the safety and recovery of our people’s assets, compensation for their losses, etc. We know that claim files are still not fully settled. When did that exercise start and what was your experience on that front?

KPF: The Security Council by Resolution 687 of 3 April 1991 decided to establish a Compensation Commission. The US wanted it to be located in New York. Finally, it was decided to have it in Geneva.

I was keen that the Gulf Division should attend the Commission’s meetings and got approval for me to go to Geneva. But Foreign Secretary (Mani Dixit) got the decision changed. Our Permanent Mission in Geneva attended the meetings.

The total claims globally were about \$ 350 billion – obviously exaggerated. The Commission pruned it down to \$ 52 billion. I do not know whether claims are still being accepted but I doubt it. By 2005, about \$ 248 million had been paid to over 62,000 Indians.

After I left, a separate ‘Special Kuwait Cell’ was established to handle this aspect. The cell continues even to this day, but only handling certain residual issues such as audit of the claims accounts. According to the latest MEA Annual Report, all the valid claims have already been settled. The UN

Compensation Commission has closed its claims disbursement operations.

IFAJ: This exercise was the first ever evacuation of Indian nationals in independent India's history. We did go through a smaller one when we recently evacuated our nationals from Libya. But, at that time, while the evacuation was in progress or thereafter, did it lead to a study and to a 'Standard Operating Procedure' (SOP) – within the MEA or other Government of India agencies, to prepare a standby arrangement for a similar situation in the future?

KPF: There was no proper follow-up to institute SOP. That is our weakness.

In fact, though it was our assessment that there was no need for evacuation from countries other than Iraq and Kuwait, we nevertheless had done a sort of planning on evacuating our people from the rest of the region. Our various missions in the region had decided where our people would collect in case of an emergency, how they would be contacted in case evacuation was needed, etc. We had reasonably comprehensive plans on logistics, ground transportation to the airport, seaport, etc., albeit in a notional sense. This exercise was being carried out discretely. We did not want to talk about it openly then as it would have been politically unwise. It would also have created panic.

IFAJ: What is your recollection of the events as Operation Desert Storm got underway?

KPF: Once the Americans started amassing their troops in the region, we figured out that America was determined to take military action to push Saddam out. If the Pentagon is all dressed up, there has to be a party. I requested and got from the US Mission the daily news bulletin they were getting. It was of some help in figuring out what the US was up to.

Nevertheless, we continued our efforts to find a negotiated solution to the problem. We worked with Algeria, Yugoslavia, France, etc., with a peace plan but it was not going anywhere. An Iraqi delegation led by a Minister of State – I cannot recall the name now – came to Delhi at that time and the American Mission in Delhi got very worried, as a story spread that Iraq was prepared to withdraw. It was Christmas time and there was talk of a Christmas gift by Saddam Hussein. The Americans wanted a war, they were preparing for it and any withdrawal was not part of that plan. The US DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) in Delhi came and met me. I did tell him of the Iraqi offer to quit Kuwait. He was perturbed to hear that.

Three or four days before the American action, the UN Secretary General Perez de Cuellar had gone to Baghdad and Saddam Hussein did say, in so many words, that under certain conditions, he was prepared to withdraw.

As far as we were concerned, we did not know at what stage the American military action was going to stop. We still had some people left there. Also, I remember, after our Embassy staff left, we arranged for some local Indians to take care of the affairs. Some of them were from Kerala. As mentioned earlier, I used to talk to them in Malayalam using innocuous sounding words, lest the conversation get them into trouble. Those young people were in fact risking their lives but they were of great help.

IFAJ: When the Coalition Forces moved into Kuwait, what was the Government of India's stated position? Did America ask India for specific assistance?

KPF: Of course, we were disappointed at the military action but we recognized that this was being done under a UN resolution. The Americans asked help and India "discretely" extended refuelling facility at Mumbai. There was a massive domestic political uproar and it had to be subsequently withdrawn.

After the liberation of Kuwait, we wanted to send a team to reopen our Mission. Prime Minister Chandrasekhar sought US assistance to facilitate the reopening, though there was no need for it.

IFAJ: Once the Iraqi forces had been pushed out of Kuwait and the Kuwaiti administration slowly started moving back, our people would have started moving back. There must have been many problems. Any recollection about that phase?

KPF: Once Kuwait was liberated, we had two primary concerns: first, that our people should get back as soon as possible; secondly, that in the reconstruction of Kuwait we wanted to have a share.

At that time, Kuwait had imposed a requirement called PCC (Police Clearance Certificate) for people who wanted to come back. So we had to arrange for it. There was some problem especially in Kerala. I found that the Kerala Police were slow in issuing the certificates. I went to Thiruvananthapuram and sorted it out. In fact, the number of Indians who "went back" exceeded the number evacuated!

As regards reconstruction, we were not getting much initially. What we have to recognize is that there was naturally an understandable preference for those countries that played a leading role in liberating Kuwait through military action. However, we did talk to the Kuwaiti authorities and we got some contracts. The first visit was by Foreign Minister Madhavrao Solanki. We did not find any coldness on the part of the Kuwaitis. Later, Commerce Minister Subramanyan Swamy went to Kuwait and that Ministry circulated a report claiming that many contracts had been given to Indian companies. It was sheer exaggeration.

IFAJ: Can you tell us any other interesting personal or anecdotal recollection related to the evacuation? Today, as you look back, what are your general feelings?

KPF: What impressed me was that our Missions, our Ministries, central government departments and state government agencies were able to act in a very coordinated fashion, in the light of the emergency situation and with almost no routine problems of finances, jurisdiction, etc. There were no hiccups that could not be sorted out with just a phone call.

In conclusion, as we talk, the US has withdrawn from Iraq. The US gained nothing and lost a lot. It was an unnecessary and unjust war. The clear beneficiary is Iran. In a rational world Iran should have sent a thank you note to President Bush.

In my book *Commonsense on War on Iraq*, published in 2003, I have said that there was no WMD in Iraq, and that the US was getting into a quagmire. I would urge all to read in that book the final judgment of the International War Crimes Tribunal headed by Ramsey Clark, formerly Attorney General of the US.

We should always look at the big picture. The evacuation was needed because of the war. The 1991 war was not necessary. The subsequent genocide sanctions and the 2003 war were unjust and unnecessary, to put it mildly. The US accelerated the end of the uni-polar world by going into Iraq. The world applauded the US action in 1990-91: it did not prevent the war in 2003. There was no little boy, *a la* Hans Christian Andersen, to point out that the Emperor was naked.

IFAJ: Thank you, Ambassador, for recollecting such an important event in India's diplomatic history that provides sufficient insight on India's willpower and preparedness to handle emergencies of such magnitude.
