

Hostage crisis over in England

STANSTED, England (AP) — All of the roughly 150 passengers held hostage on a hijacked Afghan airliner exited the plane early today, ending the crisis after nearly four days, police said.

About 85 men, women and children walked down the staircase of the plane about 3:50 a.m. (9:50 CST). Two hours later, about 65 more hostages were seen exiting the Ariana airlines plane, their hands in the air.

After the first group was released, police had said negotiations were continuing to win freedom for the dozens of other captives still aboard the Boeing 727, parked at Stansted airport north of London.

Authorities planned to carry out a sweep of the Ariana airlines Boeing 727 to ensure no passengers remained on board.

It was not immediately clear if the hijackers were among those seen exiting the plane shortly before authorities announced an end to the crisis.

"We need to start the process of identifying hostages and hostage takers," said Joe Edwards, an Essex County assistant chief constable. "We need to ensure the airplane itself

is safe to enter." Joe Edwards, Essex County police assistant chief constable, had said earlier that the released hostages would be taken to a safe location and would undergo medical checks.

Before the release, officials said 151 hostages, including 21 children, were believed on board the aircraft, which was hijacked early Sunday on a domestic flight leaving Kabul, Afghanistan's capital.

It then began a meandering journey, stopping in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Russia before landing in London.

As the first surprise release got under way, police vehicles parked nearby and bright lights shined up the staircase toward a steady stream of people leaving the jetliner, the men with their hands in the air.

Moments before that, two of the hijackers had left the aircraft for a meeting with negotiators on the tarmac, Edwards said.

"We have worked hard throughout the day to build on the trust," he said later.

"We have negotiated a face-to-face encounter between us and two hostage takers."

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Essex County assistant chief constable

It was not clear if the negotiations continued in person or via other channels.

Police also left a box of unspecified "equipment" near the steps where the first group of passengers exited to assist with negotiations, police spokeswoman Kim White said. She would not elaborate.

Police expressed hope on Wednesday that a resolution was close.

Early Wednesday, the hijackers had ejected a flight attendant, who was seen being sent forcibly down a set of stairs at the rear of the plane.

His departure came four hours after four crew members — the captain, second captain, first officer and flight engineer — escaped by using a

rope to lower themselves from the cockpit and jumping onto the tarmac.

Throughout the negotiations, authorities insisted the armed men had made no formal demands, political or otherwise.

The men, believed to be Afghans armed with grenades, pistols and daggers, had requested only that food, water and other comfort items be brought to the plane, police said.

Speculation mounted, however, that the plane was seized as part of an elaborate bid for political asylum.

At the airliner's three stops before landing at Stansted, 25 miles north of London, the hijackers released a total of 22 passengers. On Monday and Tuesday, 10 hostages were let go at Stansted.

Government attempts to track Web hackers

NEW YORK (AP) — Hackers stepped up a three-day electronic assault Wednesday against some of the Web's popular sites, inconveniencing millions of Internet users and deepening the mystery of the attackers' identities.

The apparently coordinated campaign spread to ETrade, ZDNet and other flagship sites.

The growing anxiety about the Internet's vulnerability contributed to a broad selloff on Wall Street and even prompted efforts by top federal officials to reassure Americans that authorities were doing all in their power to combat the online vandalism.

"We are committed in every way possible to tracking those who are responsible," Attorney General Janet Reno, the nation's top law enforcer, said in a news conference in Washington.

She said the motives of the vandals are not known, "but they appear to be intended to interfere with and disrupt legitimate electronic commerce."

Hackers could face a maximum penalty of 5 to 10 years in jail and up to a \$250,000 fine, or in some cases "twice the gross loss to the victim," said FBI cyber-security expert Ronald Dick.

The hacker technique, called a "denial of service attack," involves directing a flood of messages to computers that run Web sites and overrunning high-tech networks. The impact is comparable to erecting human barricades to block shoppers from entering a mall or unleashing a wave of calls to tie up a city's phone lines.

Some security experts said the flood of publicity over the incidents could actually encourage notoriety-hungry pranksters to become more aggressive.

"It's what these guys go after — to be known as the person or group of people who've pulled these attacks off," said Simon Perry, security business manager at the Computer Associates International maker of business software.

Forbes drops out of Republican race

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — After spending more than \$66 million of his own money in a relentless six-year bid for political viability, Republican candidate Steve Forbes abandoned his second presidential campaign Wednesday with little to show for his investment.

The shy, bookish conservative called it quits after third-place finishes in the New Hampshire and Delaware primaries, according to advisers who said Forbes would announce the decision today in Washington.

His departure triggered a scramble among the remaining contenders for his anti-abortion, anti-tax supporters on the conservative right. It also set the stage for a two-way race between national front-runner George W. Bush and Sen. John McCain of Arizona, the surging underdog.

"I'm going to be working hard to appeal to his voters," Bush said, as he prepared for a clash with McCain in South Carolina's Feb. 19 primary.

Fresh off a landslide victory in New Hampshire, McCain made his own bid for Forbes' supporters. "Most Republicans think my tax cut ... is far more conservative than Governor Bush's tax plan. I think they'll be headed in my direction," he said between campaign stops.

The appeals underscored that Forbes, more than the previous six GOP candidates who dropped out of the race, left his mark on the political scene he failed to conquer. His flat income tax plan became a national issue in his failed 1996 presidential race, and this year he helped popularize GOP economic themes such as health care savings accounts.

He also is one of the GOP's top fund-raising attractions.

Exit polls in the first three contests showed that Forbes fared best among voters whose top priority was taxes. He also did well with people looking for a candidate who stands up for what he believes.

In the end, Forbes failed to convince Republicans he could win in November.

"His candidacy failed to connect with Republicans... All the money in the world isn't going to change that."

Scott Reed
GOP strategist

"His candidacy failed to connect with Republicans outside of social conservatives in Iowa. All the money in the world isn't going to change that," said GOP strategist Scott Reed, who managed Bob Dole's 1996 campaign that was damaged by an onslaught of critical Forbes ads.

Republican analysts said Bush stood to gain most because Forbes had siphoned conservative voters from him. McCain may pick up Forbes backers who are tired of the party establishment, but the impact is probably marginal, analysts said.

"Presumably the advantage goes to Bush, but the truth is (Forbes) doesn't have enough support in the upcoming primaries to really make a difference," said Republican consultant Tony Fabrizio.

Forbes, in Michigan for a series of campaign events, canceled Wednesday's schedule and flew to New Jersey after finalizing his decision and informing staff, according to two senior advisers who spoke on condition of anonymity.

He had no immediate plans to endorse Bush or McCain, and supporters said he still resented efforts by the Texas governor's campaign to undermine his presidential bid. Bush's campaign hoped to mend fences through intermediaries.

WEATHER

TODAY	TOMORROW
Cloudy high 40, low 21	Snow high 26, low 12

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World and Nation Datelines

Turkey Kurdistan Workers Party takes political turn toward peace

ISTANBUL, Turkey (AP) — Abdullah Ocalan's rebel group announced Wednesday it will end its 15-year guerrilla insurrection against Turkey and instead pursue a political struggle for Kurdish rights.

Turkey has rejected previous overtures from the rebels of the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, as insincere and is unlikely to welcome the move. Turkish Interior Minister Sadettin Tantan refused to comment.

"There will be no reaction from authorities," predicted Ali Nihat Ozcan of the Eurasia Strategic Research Institute. "Turkish authorities are determined not to do anything until the PKK lays down its arms."

Los Angeles Alaska Airlines crash prompts inspections of MD-83 planes

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Alaska Airlines and American Airlines ordered inspections of their MD-80 airplanes Wednesday after investigators recovered a section of the tail assembly in the wreckage of Alaska's Flight 261 and found it to be damaged.

The airlines said they wanted to check a component called a jackscrew. It drives the horizontal stabilizer, which is the focus of the investigation into the Jan. 31 crash that killed 88 people off the coast of Southern California.

A 2-foot section of the screw was recovered with the main wreckage of the MD-83 about 10 miles off the coast. At first Alaska Airlines said Wednesday the jackscrew was found to be stripped, but later the airline changed its statement and said only the screw had been damaged, reflecting the description by the National Transportation Safety Board.

South Korea 1,890 agent Orange victims seek health reparations

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Almost 1,900 South Koreans have registered as Agent Orange victims, saying they were sickened by the toxic chemical sprayed along the border with North Korea 30 years ago, a veterans' group said Wednesday.

Following news reports in December, the U.S. and South Korean governments acknowledged that Agent Orange and two other defoliants were used along the border with North Korea in 1968-69.

A veterans' group said 1,890 former South Korean soldiers and farmers have registered as victims, including 150 disfigured children born to the former soldiers and border-town farmers.

Brazil Police say knife attack inspired by film doll Chucky

SAO PAULO, Brazil (AP) — Police said Wednesday that a 9-year-old boy's knife attack against a neighbor girl was inspired by the slasher doll Chucky of the "Child's Play" horror films.

The girl, 7, received 25 superficial knife wounds in the back, chest and neck and was out of danger, said doctors at Hospital da Base in Brasilia.

The attack Monday came three days after the boy watched the film "Child's Play 2" on television.

The girl's wounds were not worse because the "boy is small and did not have enough physical strength," inspector Suzana Machado said in a telephone interview from Brasilia, the nation's capital.