

Operation Devi Shakti, Background, Timeline, Challenges, Impact

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Operation Devi Shakti: On August 17, 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi instructed the Cabinet Committee to ensure that every Indian citizen stuck in Afghanistan was brought back safely. It was also decided that India would extend help to Afghan Sikhs and Hindus who wished to leave the country due to rising unrest.

The mission gained momentum, and as a fresh batch of 78 evacuees landed in Delhi, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) officially named the operation “Operation Devi Shakti.” This name was announced by External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar in a tweet on August 24, 2021, marking the Indian government’s efforts with a title that reflected strength and compassion.

Operation Devi Shakti

The key purpose of Operation Devi Shakti was to bring back Indian nationals and help Afghan citizens in distress. The mission also included evacuating the Indian embassy staff from Kabul. Dr. Jaishankar described the entire process as “difficult and complicated,” especially given the tense situation on the ground. Despite the challenges, the Indian Air Force and other defence forces ensured that the evacuation was carried out with precision. Their

timely action helped India respond swiftly to the crisis and secure the safety of not just Indians but also Afghan partners seeking protection.

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Operation Devi Shakti Background

The Taliban, along with its allied militant groups, launched a major offensive on May 1, 2021, following the withdrawal of most U.S. troops from Afghanistan. The situation rapidly deteriorated, and the group steadily gained control across various regions. Eventually, the capital city, Kabul, fell into the hands of the Taliban, leading to the complete collapse of the Afghan government.

Operation Devi Shakti Timeline

India's evacuation took place over several flights:

- **15 Aug 2021:** Kabul fell to the Taliban.
- **16 Aug 2021:** First Evacuation Flight. An IAF C-17 Globemaster from Kabul carried 40+ Indians (mostly embassy staff) to Delhi.
- **17 Aug 2021:** Second Flight. A second C-17 evacuated about 150 people (Indian diplomats, security personnel and stranded civilians). By 17 Aug, 200 individuals had been flown out (including the Indian envoy)
- **22 Aug 2021:** Tajikistan Route. An IAF flight airlifted 168 people (including 107 Indian nationals and 20 Afghan Hindus/Sikhs) from Kabul to Delhi. Another IAF C-17 had flown 89 people (87 Indians and 2 Nepalis) from Kabul to Dushanbe on 21 Aug; these 89 were flown by a special Air India flight into Delhi on 22 Aug. In parallel, 135 Indians evacuated to Doha (via U.S./NATO aircraft) returned to India on 22 Aug.
- **23 Aug 2021:** India specifically airlifted 75 Afghan Sikh community members from Kabul to safety, reflecting the PM's directive to assist Afghan Hindus/Sikhs.
- **24 Aug 2021:** Dushanbe Evacuation. An Air India Boeing flight (AI-1956) landed in Delhi carrying 78 evacuees (including 25 Indian citizens, plus Afghan Sikhs/Hindus) who had been flown from Kabul to Dushanbe a day earlier. The Gurdwara in Kabul also sent three holy scriptures to India on this flight.
- **26 Aug 2021:** Final Airlift. On 26 Aug, an IAF C-17 evacuated 24 Indians and 11 Nepalese nationals from Kabul. (Plans to airlift 180 people that day were curtailed by Taliban) This was the last major flight under Devi Shakti.

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Operation Devi Shakti Challenges

Operation Devi Shakti encountered significant challenges on the ground. The security situation around Kabul airport was volatile and disorganised, with thousands of Afghan civilians crowding its perimeter in the hope of fleeing the country. Taliban-imposed curfews and checkpoints frequently prevented evacuees from accessing the airport.

On August 26, a planned evacuation of nearly 180 individuals had to be abandoned as most of them were unable to reach the departure point due to movement restrictions. Communication breakdowns and rapidly shifting ground conditions added to the operational complexity.

Despite these obstacles, Indian authorities managed to coordinate airspace permissions, liaise with U.S. and NATO counterparts for flight slots, and implement COVID-19 safety protocols.

Operation Devi Shakti Global Impact

Operation Devi Shakti was widely acknowledged within India as a demonstration of the country's commitment to safeguarding its citizens abroad during times of crisis. The mission was praised as a reaffirmation of India's moral and constitutional responsibility to protect its nationals, with senior leaders and officials praising the coordinated effort.

The return of Hindus and Sikhs from Kabul further sparked national discourse around India's support for persecuted minorities, even renewing discussions around policies such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

On the international front, Operation Devi Shakti ran parallel to those of major global and regional powers. Despite the mission operating on a relatively smaller scale compared to Western evacuations, it was conducted with precision and urgency under rapidly deteriorating conditions. India also collaborated with foreign counterparts where possible, coordinating efforts between growing global concern over the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

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