

Operation Airlift, Background, Challenges, Significance

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Operation Airlift, also referred to as India's Iraq-Kuwait Airlift, was one of the largest civilian evacuations in human history. Conducted during the Gulf War in 1990–91, this operation aimed to rescue over 170,000 Indian nationals stranded in Kuwait and Iraq following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

The operation, coordinated by the Government of India, in partnership with Air India and the Indian Air Force is a model of diplomatic acumen, logistical coordination, and humanitarian commitment. It was recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records as the largest air evacuation of civilians ever conducted by any country.

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Operation Airlift Background

Operation Airlift was the result of invasion of Kuwait by Iraqi forces claiming territorial rights. It was led by Saddam Hussein on August 2, 1990 and was followed by a major geopolitical crisis in the Middle East, eventually marking the beginning of the Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm). Amid this political and military crisis, foreign workers in Kuwait, including a significant number of Indian expatriates, mostly employed in blue-collar jobs, were left vulnerable. The war disrupted food supplies, communication lines, and banking services, leaving Indian nationals

stranded and terrified.

The Indian Diaspora in Kuwait

At the time of Operation Airlift, over 170,000 Indians were working in Kuwait and Iraq, making them one of the largest expatriate communities in the region. Their sudden displacement posed a humanitarian crisis. With air travel suspended and commercial routes blocked, the Indian government had to act quickly to bring them home.

Also Read: [The Resistance Front](#)

Operation Airlift Execution Strategy

In response to the crisis, the **Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)**, led by then Foreign Minister **I.K. Gujral**, initiated a coordinated evacuation plan.

- Foreign Minister along with a high level delegation went to Iraq. There he personally met Saddam Hussein and negotiated the safe evacuation
- India's diplomatic missions in Baghdad and Amman were placed on high alert. Negotiations with Iraq and Jordan were conducted to create a safe corridor for evacuation.
- Due to international sanctions and war, direct flights from Kuwait were suspended and thus the government decided to fly evacuees to India from Amman after transporting them by road from Kuwait through Iraq.
- It was soon realized that evacuation of such large number won't be possible in military flights as it required cumbersome airspace clearances
- Thus Air India was called to partner in Operation Airlift. It conducted over 480 flights in 59 days between 13th August and 20th October and evacuated approximately 1,70,000 expatriates.

Operation Airlift Challenges

Operation Airlift was full of challenges at every stage. Starting from coordination of multiple stakeholders to ensuring health and safety of all evacuees, everything was dealt with as much possible precision.

- **Distributive Justice** in prioritizing who gets evacuated first.
- The expatriates were mostly semi literate and thus did not understand the gravity of the situation and insisted on staying back
- Many expatriates submitted their legal documents to their employers who were now missing or dead.
- Uncertainty in number of people arriving before every scheduled flight.
- Certain flights were delayed due to logistical efficiency and crew had to stay longer which led to certain tiffs
- Risk of air strikes and military action from coalition forces
- Limited communication infrastructure
- End to end transport facilities and shelter in transit zones

The Government of India overcame all these challenges by quick thinking and fostering collaborations.

- They collaborated with International Red Cross Society
- Local Governments in Jordan, Iraq and Kuwait

- Government of Kerala dispatched food items for stranded Indians in Kuwait
- Lot of Indian volunteers and community leaders through their references extended logistical support

Operation Airlift Significance

With the success of Operation Airlift, Air India entered into the Guinness book of World Records for the largest evacuation effort by Civil Airline.

- It was proactive diplomacy spearheaded by then foreign minister I.K. Gujral who established rapport with Iraqi leadership and ensured safety of Indian nationals
- It established India as a neutral and humanitarian focused power
- Operation Airlift set a global precedent for mass civilian evacuation during conflict
- It showcased India's ability to coordinate large-scale international operations through its efficient civil aviation infrastructure
- The remarkable courage and resilience showed by pilots and crew of AirIndia in hostile and unpredictable environment is celebrated globally and remains unmatched in aviation history
- Operation Airlift is a testament to India's commitment to its diaspora and proved our capability as global humanitarian leader.

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Operation Cactus	Operation Keller
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