

India Demands 'Immediate, Safe Return' Of Air Force Pilot Captured By Pakistan

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Prisoner of 'war': Pakistan parades Indian pilot after shooting down two jets as Imran Khan tells New Delhi 'better sense' is needed 'given the weapons we have' and raises spectre of nuclear conflict.

Pakistan's armed forces claim to have shot down two Indian Air Force aircraft over its Kashmir territory

India in return say they shot down a Pakistani F-16 fighter jet over Indian-occupied Kashmir's Jammu region

Indian Air Force pilot captured in Pakistani Kashmir paraded in front of cameras before being blindfolded

Follows Indian airstrike in Pakistan's Balakot region on Tuesday in retaliation for February 14 suicide attack

New Delhi claims a 'very large' number of Islamist jihadist militants were killed in Tuesday's airstrikes

Today, Pakistan said that they have 'no intention of escalation, but are fully prepared to do so if forced'

Pakistan has shut its airspace to all commercial flights 'until further notice' in response to escalation

Pakistan and India said today they had shot down each other's warplanes, in a dramatic escalation of the dangerous confrontation between the nuclear-armed rivals.

Pakistan said it downed two Indian jets in its airspace and captured two pilots, later amended to one: whom they then seemingly paraded - blindfolded and bloodied - for the camera.

The pilot, named as Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, is seen in a video of what appears to be an interview at a Pakistani Air base, in which he refuses to reveal any information about his capture - or captors.

The video was slammed by India, who called it 'vulgar', adding that it expected his 'immediate and safe return' in a statement release by the Ministry of External Affairs. Â

Earlier today, India confirmed the loss of one of its planes and said it had shot down a Pakistani fighter jet, in a conflict played out over the skies of the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir.

In a sign of the deepening crisis, Pakistan closed its airspace 'until further notice'. At least six airports were shuttered in India, and a vast area of airspace north of New Delhi was closed to civilian flights.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan has urged for 'wisdom and better sense' as he opened up for talks with Indian leaders saying: 'If escalation begins from here, where will it go?'

This video purportedly shows Indian Air Force Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman blindfolded and bloodied in Pakistani custody

Pakistan's Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), later released this photo of the pilot showing him having had his face cleaned up and holding a cup of tea

Attacked: Locals in Kashmir can be seen beating the Indian pilot before Pakistani soldiers step in to arrest him

Captured: Photos shared on social media purports to show the moment when one of the Indian Air Force pilots is arrested in Pakistani Kashmir

'Can we afford any miscalculation with the kind of weapons that we have and you have?' he said in a televised statement after both sides said they had shot down each other's warplanes.

'I once again invite India to come to the negotiating table,' said Khan, who has called for dialogue with New Delhi in the past.

'Better sense should prevail,' he added, before alluding to the nuclear arsenal of both South Asian countries.

Khan also repeated the military's earlier statement that it had shot down two Indian Air Force planes, and that defence personnel was in their custody.

Pakistani authorities have maintained that the pilot is 'being treated well', however video footage of the capture of Wing Commander Varthaman shows him being beaten up by civilians.

Despite Geneva Convention rules prohibiting the public display of prisoners, the military then circulated a video of Varthaman being interviewed by Pakistani forces.Â It shows him blindfolded with his feet and hands tied, and blood running down his face.

The clip shows him giving his service number - 27981 - and confirming he is a 'flying pilot', and telling his captors he is Hindu.

He asks whether he is in the custody of the Pakistani Army and then politely tells his captors he can't reveal any more information. In the clip, he can be heard saying: 'I'm sorry sir, as per - that's all I'm supposed to tell you.'

In its statement released after the video emerged, India's External Affairs Ministry called the downing of their aircraft an 'unprovoked act of aggression by Pakistan against India'.

Indian soldiers and Kashmiri onlookers stand near the remains of an Indian Air Force (IAF) aircraft after it crashed in Budgam district in Indian-occupied Kashmir

Police officials in Indian-occupied Kashmir said that two Indian pilots and a civilian had died after an air force plane crashed, but would not confirm if the plane had been shot down by Pakistani forces

People stand next to the wreckage of Indian Air Force's helicopter after it crashed in Budgam

Speaking out: Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan is seen in his TV address to the nation, in which he invited India for talks

Escalations: This map shows where one of the downed planes crashed in Indian Kashmir, as well as where Tuesday's airstrikes against an alleged jihadist militant training camp in the Balakot region took place just days after a suicide bomb attack in Indian Kashmir

It said: 'It is unfortunate that instead of fulfilling its international obligation and bilateral commitment to take credible action against terrorist entities and individuals operating from its soil, Pakistan has acted with aggression against India.

'It was clearly conveyed that India reserves the right to take firm and decisive action to protect its national security, sovereignty and territorial integrity against any act of aggression or cross-border terrorism.

'India also strongly objected to Pakistan's vulgar display of an injured personnel of the Indian Air Force in violation of all norms of International Humanitarian Law and the Geneva Convention. It was made clear that Pakistan would be well advised to ensure that no harm comes to the Indian defence personnel in its custody. India also expects his immediate and safe return.'

A Pakistani military spokesman said that one of the downed Indian planes had fallen in Pakistani-held Kashmir, while the other came down on the Indian side of the heavily militarised de facto border dividing the territory.

'We do not want escalation, we do not want to go towards war,' Major General Asif Ghafoor told a press conference, calling for talks with New Delhi.

One of the captured pilots was in custody and the other was in hospital, he said.

Ghafoor said the jets had been shot down after Pakistani planes earlier flew across the Line of Control, the de facto border in Kashmir, to the Indian side in a show of strength, hitting non-military targets including supply depots.

Afterwards, he said, the two Indian planes crossed the LoC into Pakistani airspace.

Downed: Video footage shows the plane that crashed in Indian-occupied Kashmir burning

Locals and Indian soldiers have gathered around the remains of an Indian Air Force aircraft after it crashed in Budgam district, some 18 miles from Srinagar

Pakistan's armed forces claim the second plane, not pictured, went down on their side of the Kashmir border and that the pilot of the other plane was captured by Pakistani troops

Indian soldiers stand next to the wreckage of Indian Air Force's helicopter after it crashed in Budgam district in Kashmir

Indian army artillery vehicles drive on a highway in Akhnoor, in Jammu district in the state of Jammu & Kashmir

Pakistani soldiers patrol in the area where Indian planes were reportedly shot down by Pakistani forces on Wednesday

'The Pakistan Air Force was ready, they took them on, there was an engagement. As a result both the Indian planes were shot down and the wreckage of one fell on our side while the wreckage of the other fell on their side,' he said.

He denied initial reports that a Pakistan plane had been shot down, saying accounts an F-16 had been lost were incorrect as none were used in the action.

Later, Indian foreign ministry spokesman Rajeesh Kumar announced that a Pakistan jet was hit as it took part in an operation 'to target military installations on the Indian side'.

'The Pakistani aircraft was seen by ground forces falling from the sky on the Pakistan side,' he told a briefing.

'In this engagement, we have unfortunately lost one Mig-21. The pilot is missing in action. Pakistan has claimed that he is in their custody.'

Unrelated to this week's escalation, India is building more than 14,000 bunkers suitable for families living along the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir, hoping to keep them safe near their homes instead of evacuating them.

The new shelters, which were planned before this week's spike in tensions, are supposed to reduce that fear and prevent people from having to flee when the shelling begins.

Villagers on the Indian side of the border said they were tired of fleeing their homes when outbreaks of firing erupt.

Some have seen family members killed, and the cost of leaving behind their cattle and crops is too heavy for many poor farmers.

Tanattar Singh, a frail 75-year-old man from Chachwal village, said his daughter was killed in 2002 when she was hit by a bullet just outside their house, which is surrounded by wheat fields near a watch tower.

'Firing could happen again and we know there are risks of living so close to the border,' Singh said, as he and other elders watched earth being dug out for the construction of a bunker for one of the village's 400 families.

'But what can we do? We can't leave the village for good like some rich people do.'

Government engineers said work on the underground steel and concrete structures, which could cost a total of \$60 million, began in June last year as relations between the nuclear-armed rivals worsened.

State government officials and contractors said hundreds of underground bunkers, with their walls and roofs three times the thickness of a regular house and consuming ten times as much steel, have already been built.

Shravan Kumar, whose wheat and mustard fields run along the barbed wire, urged Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to do more to end the frequent shelling, saying only a tough crackdown on militancy in Kashmir could 'break Pakistan's back'.

'I had to flee my house four times in December alone,' said Kumar, a 60-year-old father-of-three. 'Can you imagine the toll it takes on our families? Bunkers are not a solution, neither is this 'one strike here, one strike there' policy. Finish militancy in Kashmir, and this will end.'

The incidents are the latest in a dangerous sequence of events between the two countries, whose ties have been under intense strain since a February 14 suicide bombing in Indian Kashmir that killed 40 troops.

Pakistani protesters burn an effigy of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a rally in Peshawar, Pakistan, Wednesday

Students of Islami Jamiat Talaba (IJT), a wing of religious political party Pakistan Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), chant slogans during an anti-India protest rally, in Lahore

People celebrate the shooting down of Indian planes by Pakistani forces with fireworks, in Karachi, Pakistan

People chant slogans during a rally after Pakistan shot down two Indian military aircrafts, in Peshawar, Pakistan

Students of Islami Jamiat Talaba burn an Indian flag during the protest rally in Lahore

One of the banners carried during the Islami Jamiat Talaba rally shows Modi with a target on his face

People chant slogans during a rally in support of Pakistan's army, in Peshawar

New Delhi had promised to act, and on Tuesday its warplanes flew into Pakistani airspace and struck what it said was a camp of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), the militant group that claimed the Kashmir bombing.

It was India's first air strike on Pakistani soil since the neighbours fought a war in 1971 - when neither had nuclear weapons.

Islamabad, while denying the Indian strike caused any major damage or casualties, quickly vowed to retaliate, fuelling fears of a disastrous confrontation in South Asia.

Earlier Wednesday, the Indian foreign minister sought to ease the situation by downplaying Tuesday's strike, repeating Indian claims that it had been a pre-emptive attack on JeM as the group planned further assaults.

'India does not wish to see further escalation of this situation. India will continue to act with responsibility and restraint,' Sushma Swaraj said during talks in China with her counterparts from Beijing and Moscow.

The US, along with China and the European Union, have called for cooler heads to prevail.

'We encourage India and Pakistan to exercise restraint, and avoid escalation at any cost,' US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said after speaking with his counterparts from both countries.

China Wednesday again urged the two sides to 'exercise restraint' and seek dialogue.

The confrontation represents the first major foreign policy crisis for Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, who is believed to be close to the powerful military and who came to power last year vowing to seek dialogue with New Delhi.

Pakistan has denied involvement in the Kashmir bombing on February 14.

While India has consistently accused its neighbour of supporting extremist groups, Pakistan has equally vehemently denied any role in attacks in India and its only Muslim-majority state, Kashmir.

The Himalayan region has been divided between India and Pakistan since independence in 1947. They have fought two of their three wars over the territory.

Previously, the US and other members of the international community have acted to defuse tensions.

'If I were Washington, I'd be in overdrive making phone calls and signalling that it wants tensions to be de-escalated now,' said Moeed Yusuf, an expert at the US Institute of Peace in Washington.

'The risks of letting this play out are too great.'

Several airlines, including Emirates, Etihad and Qatar Airways, suspended flights to Pakistan after the South Asian nation closed its air space today, and flight tracking portals showed Singapore Airlines, British Airways and others were forced to reroute flights.

Airlines flying over India and Pakistan to Europe, the Middle East and Asia were disrupted and some flights were routed through Mumbai on India's western coast, so they could head further south and avoid Pakistan air space, an Indian government official told Reuters.

India's Border Security Force (BSF) soldiers patrol along the fenced border with Pakistan in Ranbir Singh Pura sector near Jammu on Tuesday

Warplanes pounded a camp belonging to Jaish-e-Mohammad, the group that claimed a suicide bombing that killed dozens of troops in Indian Kashmir, the country's Foreign Secretary claimed. Pictured: Trees damaged by the raid Tuesday

Mark Martin, founder and chief executive at Martin Consulting India, said about 800 flights a day use the India-Pakistan air corridor, making it 'very critical'.

'You can't overfly China, so you have to overfly Pakistan and India and go to Southeast Asia and Australia. Most of the traffic destined for Bangkok and Singapore will have to fly over Iran and then possibly take a detour,' he said.

Qatar Airways said in a statement it has temporarily suspended flights to eight cities in India and Pakistan 'due to the ongoing situation on the India-Pakistan border' and that its flights routed over the India-Pakistan air space may be delayed due to rerouting in the area.

All flights from Kabul to India have been cancelled until further notice while India's state-run carrier Air India has cancelled its flights until the first week of March, an airline official in Kabul said.

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