

EGYPT /MALTA - HIJACKING OF EGYPTIAN AIRLINER
23 NOVEMBER, 1985*

FOLLOWING IS A STATEMENT ISSUED BY AN EGYPTIAN AUTHORITY CONCERNING THE HIJACKING OF A CIVIL EGYPTIAN AIRLINER:

[AFTER AN EGYPTIAN AIRLINER LEFT ATHENS AIRPORT ON SATURDAY EVENING 23RD OF NOVEMBER 1985, IT BECAME OBVIOUS THAT A TERRORIST GROUP ARMED WITH GUNS AND HAND GRENADES HAVE ALREADY BOARDED THE PLANE IN CONTRADICTION TO SECURITY MEASURES IN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT. THIS GROUP WAS ABLE TO HIJACK THE PLANE AFTER A FIGHT WITH THE SECURITY MEN ON BOARD THE PLANE WHERE ONE OF THE SECURITY MEN WAS SHOT.

FOLLOWING THE HIJACKERS' ORDERS THE PLANE WAS DIRECTED TO VALLETTA AIRPORT IN MALTA. ON BOARD THE HIJACKERS HAVE TIED THE PASSENGERS TO THEIR SEATS. STARTING WITH EXECUTING SEVEN OF THEM, THEY THREATENED TO KILL ONE PASSENGER AFTER THE OTHER EVERY HOUR.

DURING THE EARLY HOURS OF SUNDAY 24TH OF NOVEMBER 1985 THE HIJACKERS THREW SEVEN PASSENGERS OFF THE PLANE ON THE TARMAC. ALL OF THEM SERIOUSLY INJURED BY SHOTS THROUGH THEIR HEADS.

THE HIJACKERS BEHAVIOUR CLEARLY INDICATED THAT THEY WERE DETERMINED TO EXECUTE ALL THE INNOCENT PASSENGERS TO THE LAST ONE- WOMEN AND CHILDREN INCLUDED- AS A RESULT TO DAMAGES TO THE PLANE CAUSED BY AN EXCHANGE OF SHOOTING BETWEEN THE HIJACKERS AND THE SECURITY MEN ON BOARD THE PLANE; THE MALTESE AUTHORITIES REFUSED TO REFUEL THE PLANE.

ON THE OTHER HAND STATES SUPPOSED TO BE THE DESTINATIONS--AS DEMANDED BY THE HIJACKERS-- HAVE REFUSED TO GIVE THEM LANDING PERMISSION; ACCORDINGLY THE TERRORISTS THREATENED TO BLOW UP THE PLANE WITH EVERYONE ON BOARD.

THE LYBIAN AMBASSADOR TO VALETTA HAS TALKED WITH THE HIJACKERS, AT THE AIRPORT THEN LEFT DIRECTLY TO TRIPOLI ON HIS GOVERNMENT CALL.

MEANWHILE THE PILOT OF THE HIJACKED PLANE REPORTED THAT THE SITUATION HAS BECOME EXTREMELY DANGEROUS. DUE TO THE HIJACKERS BEHAVIOUR AND THREATS THE PILOT EMPHASISED THAT THE PLANE AND ITS PASSENGERS WERE FACING GREAT DANGER.

IT WAS CLEAR ENOUGH THEN THAT THE CONTINUOUS KILLING OF INNOCENT PASSENGERS WITHOUT ANY SPECIFIC TARGET OR ACTUAL DEMAND --IN ADDITION TO THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF THE PLANE TO TAKE OFF-- ALL THESE FACTORS HAVE CREATED A SITUATION THAT COULD NOT PERSIST.

FURTHER WAITING MEANT MORE CHANCES FOR THE HIJACKERS TO CONTINUE BLOOD-SHED BY KILLING THE PASSENGERS ONE AFTER THE OTHER AND BY BLOWING UP THE PLANE. IT WAS THEN A MUST THAT THE PLANE SHOULD BE STORMED IMMEDIATELY TO RESCUE WHOEVER COULD BE RESCUED, AND TO SPOIL THE TERRORISTS PLANS.

THE STORMING OPERATION WAS CARRIED SUCCESSFULLY ACCORDING TO A PRE-DETERMINED PLAN. THE HIJACKERS WERE ATTACKED IN A WAY THAT TOOK ONLY FIVE MINUTES.

EGYPTIAN COMMANDOS SHOT AT THE TERRORISTS WITHOUT INJURING ONE SINGLE PASSENGER. THERE WAS NO CASUALTIES AMONG THE EGYPTIAN COMMANDOS. THEN THE HIJACKERS THREW THREE PHOSPHORIC HAND-GRENADES AT THE FRONT AND REAR OF THE PLANE WHICH CAUSED A HUGE FIRE AND THE SCATTERING OF BURNING FRAGMENTS.

THE FACILITIES AVAILABLE AT VALLETTA AIRPORT TO FACE SUCH A SITUATION WERE HUMBLE AND LIMITED: FORTY FOUR PASSENGERS WERE RESCUED.

EGYPT AIR INSTANTLY TOOK ALL THE NECESSARY MEASURES TO PROVIDE MEDICAL TREATMENT FOR ALL THE INJURED WHATEVER NATIONALITY IN MALTESE HOSPITALS, AND WAS ALSO PREPARED TO TREAT THEM IN EGYPT IF THEY WISHED TO.

THE LATEST AVAILABLE INFORMATION UNTIL NOW INDICATES THAT THE HIJACKERS WHO CARRIED OUT THAT MISCHIEVOUS ACT BELONG TO A PALESTINIAN SPLIT GROUP OF THE PLO THAT WORKS FOR AN ARAB STATE WELL KNOWN FOR PRACTICING TERRORISM AND FOR SHELTERING TERRORISTS.

EGYPT, WHILE REGRETTING THE LOSS OF EGYPTIAN VICTIMS AND VICTIMS FROM OTHER NATIONALITIES REPEATEDLY AND FIRMLY CONDEMNS THIS CRIMINAL STYLE THAT AIMS TO PUT THE WORLD IN A HELPLESS SITUATION FACING TERRORISM AND TERRORIST WHO THREATEN LIVES OF INNOCENT PASSENGERS AND THE SAFETY OF INTERNATIONAL AVIATION.

EGYPT, WELL-KNOWN FOR ITS FIGHT TO ACHIEVE SAFETY AND SECURITY FOR ALL ITS CITIZENS, REAFFIRMS ANEW THAT IT WOULD NEVER BE SUBJECT TO PRESSURE AND BLACK-MAILING ACTS WHATEVER THE SOURCES ARE. EGYPT WILL CONTINUE STANDING UP TO SUCH ACTS TO THE UT MOST DETERMINATION TO SECURE LIVES OF ITS CITIZENS AND GUESTS ON BOARD ANY EGYPTIAN AEROPLANE. THOSE CRIMINALS WILL SEE HOW EGYPT TOUGHLY MEANS IT.

*[This is the text of a press release dated 26 November 1985, made available by Mr Saad Z Nassar, Press & Information Counsellor of the Embassy of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Canberra]

MALTA : HIJACKING OF EGYPTIAN AIRLINER*Prime Minister Defends Govt's Action in Hijack Drama

The House of Representatives yesterday adjourned as a sign of mourning for the victims of the hijack drama which ended so tragically on Sunday. The House adjourned on a motion of Premier Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici, which was seconded by the leader of the opposition. Before the adjournment the Premier made a statement defending the Govt's actions in the hijack incident. He began by saying that although investigations into the hijack and the subsequent events were still going on, he felt he had to make a statement to establish certain salient points. The question arose as to why the hijacked Egyptian plane was given permission to land in Malta. This permission was given because it was established from the information given to Govt that unless this was done there was the serious, imminent danger of the plane crashing into the sea, so after permission was refused for some time, and then it was found out that it was no longer prudent to continue to refuse, permission was granted. The Premier then dwelt on the Govt's refusal to meet the hijackers' persistent demands for fuel. This refusal came after Govt learned that some persons had already been killed aboard the plane, while others were being killed or about to be killed, every 15 or 20 minutes, and this was when the plane had already landed in Malta. When this became known, it was decided not to provide fuel once the killings were taking place on Maltese territory. The impression the Govt had was that several persons had been killed. Later it was found out that these persons were in fact injured, not dead.

The decision not to give fuel to the plane never wavered, the Premier said. The hijackers repeatedly asked for fuel, but the Govt told them that before discussing refuelling, the hijackers first had to release all passengers. They wanted to release only a few - in fact 11 were released. But they were not ready to release them all. While some passengers were coming out of the plane, having had the hijackers' permission to do so, Maltese personnel saw one person being kicked from the stairs and hurled to the ground, while another was killed. The other person was practically dead. The Premier added that the more incidents of this nature took place, the more Govt's resolve was strengthened not to give in. The Egyptian Govt - one has to remember the aircraft was Egyptian - asked the Maltese Govt whether it could send an anti-terrorist squad to help. The Maltese Govt accepted the offer, the Premier said, "Because we have neither the means nor the knowhow to solve it by ourselves." The option of eventually storming the plane was not excluded, so it was decided to take up the Egyptian Govt's offer. During the long negotiations the hijackers were told they could not be given any fuel and after these cruel acts were carried out, they were told that no fuel would be given, under any circumstances. The hijackers were invited to give themselves up to the Maltese authorities. Malta after all is a land of justice and mercy, and it would deal with them with justice and mercy. The Premier added that the hijackers were told that Malta sympathised with the Arab cause, but believed that their actions were shaming the Arab cause, and were a betrayal of that cause, as innocent lives were being involved, people who had nothing to do with the cause. The Premier stated the hijackers would not say what they wanted or where they wanted to go after leaving Malta. At one stage they asked to speak to the representatives of two Arab countries. One of these countries had no representative here, but the representative of the other country agreed.

...2

When he spoke to the hijackers, they told him that in order to discuss with him he had to board the plane. He felt he should not do so, and his Govt, whom he consulted, backed him. The Maltese Govt then asked the hijackers whether they wanted to speak to the PLO representatives, but they refused. Malta had a written promise from several Govts, and a verbal promise from Arab countries, that they would not allow the plane to land in their territories. Indeed the Egyptian and Greek Govts insisted with the Maltese Government that the plane should not be allowed to depart. The Premier said they told the hijackers that if they allowed the plane to leave they would probably be forced to some controlled airport. To this they replied that they were ready, if forced, to land in such airport, to blow up the plane. This, the Maltese Govt felt, was a real possibility and posed a danger for the passengers. The Premier said they saw that the hijackers meant what they said, that they would kill the passengers one after the other. It was also noted that the passengers who were being victimised by the hijackers were from certain countries and one could therefore see that passengers were from certain countries and one could therefore see that a plan was being carried out which would embarrass Malta had they allowed to proceed - that is to allow the killing of all the passengers from the countries the hijackers had singled out. They had to decide whether to storm the aircraft and the arrangement made with Egyptian Anti-terrorist Squad was that the operation would be short, and that they would try to make it possible for the passengers to leave the aircraft in a short time. The Premier said that on the understanding that this would be done, they had agreed on when to storm the plane. Unfortunately, what had happened was not what they wanted. When the storming started, the hijackers set fire to the plane by using their incendiary grenades. It was then only slightly possible for one to save the passengers. The Premier then gave details of the number of passengers on board, killed or injured. In giving the figures, he said that a Maltese task force member was also injured as were four members of the Egyptian Anti-terrorist Squad. The eleven who were released by the hijackers uninjured were three Egyptians and eight Filipinos. One corpse and three people were recovered from under the aircraft. The Premier said that because investigations were continuing and others had to be held, one should give more details about the sequence of events and about what was said before the storming of the aircraft. He expressed gratitude to the police, the task force and AFM for their unstinted work, some even at peril to themselves when, for instance, conveying to the aircraft on two occasions. He also thanked the Department of Civil Aviation employees, especially the firemen who had done their best to save lives from the inferno and who, if they had not succeeded, it was not due to any lack of ability or courage. He also thanked all staff at the hospital, doctors and nurses who worked overtime and spared no pains, Air Malta employees, and his cabinet. The Premier said he was sorry the matter had not ended successfully as one wished but it had to be emphasised that the main aim of the decisions taken had been first to save as many passengers as possible, and their wish had been that all passengers be released as soon as possible. Repeated appeals had been made to the hijackers for them at least to release the children and women on board, but these appeals unfortunately were not heeded. It should also be emphasised that the aim was also in that no way should they give the impression of being weak in the face of threats, cruelty and harshness of the hijackers, and in the decisions taken they wanted to show they would not in any way give way or agree to such things happening, because it was their opinion that innocent lives who had nothing to do with the matter should not be sacrificed, imperilled or blackmailed in this manner. The Premier said this was what he should emphasise at this stage. One should also thank those governments which both during this tragic event and subsequently had shown appreciation at the firm way they had acted and supported them continually, both morally and at times even materially. He said it would be suitable, as a sign of respect to those who had lost their lives in Malta without Malta being

...3.

being at fault, and against its wishes, to adjourn the sitting for that day as a way of expressing deep sorrow and disappointment at the way matters had ended and show solidarity with the victims and their families and people.

*[This is a text of a press report which appeared in the Malta Times in relation to the hijacking in December, 1985 of an Egyptian airliner. The report was provided by the High Commissioner of the Republic of Malta, Canberra.]