



Cabinet Secretary

PRIME MINISTER

**ALLEGATIONS OF UK INVOLVEMENT IN THE INDIAN
OPERATION AT SRI HARMANDIR SAHIB, AMRITSAR 1984**

1. You set out at Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons on 15 January 2014 the Government's overall view on the tragic events surrounding military action at Sri Harmandir Sahib (informally known as the Golden Temple complex) in Amritsar in 1984: "...What happened at Amritsar 30 years ago led to a tragic loss of life. It remains a source of deep pain to Sikhs everywhere". The purpose of this report is not to investigate or pass judgement on those events, but to meet your request to establish the facts about UK advice to the Indian Government on its plans for an operation at Sri Harmandir Sahib, as mentioned in the two documents released inadvertently as part of annual releases under the Public Records Act.
2. It is worth noting that the fact that the UK provided some operational advice at the request of the Indian Intelligence Co-ordinator had already been put in the public domain in 2007 through a book by Bahukutumbi Raman (a former member of India's Intelligence Research and Analysis Wing).

3. To meet your remit I have looked at:

- (i) why the UK Government agreed to a request from the Indian authorities to provide military advice on their contingency plans for operations at Sri Harmandir Sahib;
- (ii) the nature of the UK assistance provided;
- (iii) the impact of that assistance on the actual operation conducted by the Indian Army; and
- (iv) whether Parliament was misled.

4. We have searched around 200 files (in excess of 23,000 documents) held by all relevant Departments covering the handling of events in Amritsar, from December 1983 (when the occupiers started to arm and fortify the complex), through to June 1984. Some military files on various operations were destroyed in November 2009. This included one on the provision of military advice to the Indian authorities on their contingency plans for the temple complex. I understand this was part of a routine process undertaken by the Ministry of Defence at the 25 year review point. The decision to destroy files is made by the relevant officials on a case by case basis, assessing relevance to ongoing operations and the broader historic significance. In this instance it was apparently not felt necessary to preserve the file. However, copies of at least some documents on the destroyed files were also in other departmental files; and taken together these files provide a consistent picture of what happened.

OVERVIEW

5. I attach (Annex A) a chronology of the contacts recorded in the files between the UK and Indian authorities relating to the military operation at the temple complex. The key point is that there is no record of any assistance to the June 1984 operation (called “Blue Star” by the Indian Government) other than the limited military advice provided in mid-February.

6. There are records of a range of other visits by Indian officials and officers in that period. However, according to the files, these do not appear to have had any link to the planning of, or support for, Operation Blue Star or indeed Operation Sundown¹:
 - there had been previous UK military contact in 1982 with the Indian Counter-Terrorism Unit (the “Special Group”). But it was well before the situation at Sri Harmandir Sahib became critical, and involved different personnel. There is no suggestion in the later files relating to this visit two years earlier that it had touched at all on issues in the Punjab;

 - the Indian Intelligence Co-ordinator visited London in mid December 1983. No request for military advice was made during this visit. Nor is there any evidence that planning for, or assistance with, any potential operations at the temple complex were discussed with the UK authorities;

¹ See paragraph 17 below, which refers to recent Indian media reporting of a planned “Operation Sundown”. There is nothing in the UK files that confirms the existence of such a plan.

- there was a separate, unrelated visit to India by different UK military officers on 2 February 1984, a few days before Ministerial approval was given for the specific advisory role on contingency planning.
7. Allegations appeared in the Sunday Times on 10 June 1984 that Indian Intelligence officers had made several visits to the UK to seek expertise in planning the Indian operation at the temple complex. There were two visits from Indian officials in the February to June timeframe, but the files show that they did not relate in any way to that operation.

KEY FINDINGS

Why did the UK provide India with advice from a military expert?

8. It is clear from documents on file (Annexes B and C) that this was a response to an urgent request from the Indian Intelligence Co-ordinator for expert military advice on Indian contingency plans for potential action against those occupying the temple complex. The recommendation and decision to agree this request were based on advice from the British High Commission that it would be good for the bilateral relationship, whereas refusal would not be understood by the Indian Prime Minister, Mrs Gandhi.
9. The recommendation to Ministers was explicit that the UK Government could not contemplate assistance beyond that which might be given by the military adviser. There is no evidence in the files, or from discussion with officials involved at the time, that other forms of assistance for the operation – for example equipment or tactical intelligence – were provided for the

Indian operation. There does appear to have been some internal UK military consideration, immediately after the UK military adviser's visit to India, of whether to offer training for the potential operation, if requested by the Indian authorities, and if agreed by UK Ministers. But there is no evidence in the files that any Indian request was made, or that Ministerial permission was ever sought. Nor do officials interviewed recall any such request or offer.

10. As would be expected in the normal course of bilateral relations, the files confirm that there were on-going contacts between UK and Indian officials around the time of Operation Blue Star on potential defence-related sales, including the potential sale of Westland helicopters for civilian purposes. However, there is no record linking the provision of UK military advice to the discussion of potential defence or helicopter sales; or to any other policy or commercial issue. The scope for such a linkage is not suggested in any submission to, or comment from, a UK Minister or official. In sum, there is no evidence that the UK, at any level, attempted to use the fact that military advice had been given on request to advance any commercial objective.
11. The only UK request of the Indian Government, made after the visit, was for prior warning of any actual operation, so that UK authorities could make appropriate security arrangements in London. In the event, the UK received no warning from the Indian authorities of the launch of the operation.

What was the nature of the military advice?

12. The UK military adviser was in India between 8-17 February, including a ground recce, with the Indian Special Group, of the temple complex. This

was before - and unrelated to - the exchange of fire between Indian security forces and the occupiers of Sri Harmandir Sahib that started on 17 February.

13. I have seen the UK military adviser's visit report and the assessment which he gave the Indian authorities on 13 February. It is clear from this that the purpose of the visit was to advise Indian Counter Terrorist Team commanders on the concept of operations that they were already working up for action in the temple complex, including tactics and techniques. It is the long-standing practice of successive governments that we do not release such documents. However, I can confirm that the report makes clear that the military officer's instructions were that no UK manpower or equipment should be offered beyond the visit of this single military adviser. His assessment for the Indian authorities also made clear that this type of operation should only be put into effect as a last resort when all other courses of negotiation had failed. Beyond this, it made no comment on the timing of any potential future operation.

14. The UK officer's report back to the UK authorities stated that the main difference between the original Indian plan and his advice was that the original plan was based on obtaining a foothold within the south complex and fighting through in orthodox paramilitary style. With a view to reducing casualties, the UK military adviser recommended assaulting all objectives simultaneously, thereby assuring surprise and momentum. The advice given to the Indian authorities identified sufficient helicopters, and the capability to insert troops by helicopter, as critical requirements for this approach. The UK advice also focused on command and control arrangements, and night-time co-ordination of paramilitary with Indian Special Group forces. The

overall tone, but not detail, of this report was reflected in the formal FCO report back to the Prime Minister's office on 23 February (Annex D).

What was the impact of the UK advice?

15. The files provide limited insight into the overall impact of this advice on the Operation Blue Star which took place over three months later on 5-7 June. There is no record in the files of any formal or detailed military debrief from Indian to UK personnel, only references to the fact that one had not been received.
16. The UK High Commission in Delhi reported in February that the revised plan had been approved by Mrs Gandhi. However, it was not clear to contemporary UK officials whether this referred to a revised plan drafted by Indian officials that they had edited in the light of the UK military officer's advice, but which UK personnel had not seen; or whether Mrs Gandhi had been shown the UK military adviser's paper.
17. Recent Indian media reports suggest the operational plan developed by the Indian interlocutors of the UK military adviser was called "Sundown", and focused on detaining Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the leader of the Sikh dissidents occupying Sri Harmandir Sahib. There is no mention of "Operation Sundown" in UK files. Nor do those interviewed recall that name. Nor was the UK military adviser's report of February focused on a "snatch" operation. The plan it focused on was designed to re-establish control over the temple complex. It is, of course, possible that Indian

planning went through several iterations after the UK military adviser's visit and report.

18. A quick analysis by current UK military staff confirms that there were significant differences between the actual June operation, and the advice from the UK military officer in February. In particular, the element of surprise was not at the heart of the operation. Nor was simultaneous helicopter insertion of assault forces to dominate critical areas. The paper on the operation made public by the Indian authorities on 13 June 1984 makes clear that it was a ground assault, preceded by a warning, without a helicopter-borne element, which became a step-by-step clearance supported by armour and light artillery.

19. The FCO files (Annex E) record the Indian Intelligence Co-ordinator telling a UK interlocutor, in the same time-frame as this public Indian report, that some time after the UK military adviser's visit the Indian Army took over lead responsibility for the operation, the main concept behind the operation changed, and a frontal assault was attempted, which contributed to the large number of casualties on both sides. There is some other corroboration in the files of both a shift in the overall Indian command arrangements, and a change in the plan from that discussed with the UK military adviser in February:

- the UK military adviser's report suggested that the Indian intention in February 1984 was to pursue a police/paramilitary operation and avoid use of the Army;

- however, Mrs Gandhi's letter to Mrs Thatcher of 14 June 1984 (Annex F), explaining her decision to take military action against the occupiers of the temple complex, stated that the occupiers had been strengthening their position, that India's paramilitary forces were insufficient in number, and so the Army had had to be sent in. It is also important to note that this letter made no reference to any UK assistance, suggesting strongly that this was not regarded by the Indians as being of any great significance or relevance. Nor did Mrs Thatcher's reply of 29 June (which was released 3 January 2014 and is in the public domain) refer to UK advice;

- a key UK officer recalls being told in July 1984, by one of the Indian Intelligence Co-ordinator's senior officials, that after the February visit it had emerged that the Indian Special Group and Army did not have the helicopter capabilities for a simultaneous assault. The decision had also been taken to sacrifice surprise by warning civilians in the complex to leave before an impending assault, in an effort to reduce casualties.

20. The overall impression that the UK military officer's advice had limited impact in practice on the operation implemented by the Indian Army is consistent with the public statement on 15 January 2014 by the operation commander, Lieutenant-General Brar, that "no one helped us in our planning or in the execution of the planning." It is also consistent with recent reporting in the Indian media that there was a change of plan and approach in the months after the visit of the UK military adviser.

Was Parliament misled on UK involvement?

21. There is no record of a specific question to Ministers about practical UK support for military operations at the temple complex, despite at least one contemporary press article alleging more sustained advisory support than was in fact provided (see paragraph 7).

22. However, on 30 July 1984 the then MP for Slough, John Watts, asked the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs “what representations he has received from the Sikh community in the United Kingdom about the storming of Golden Temple in Amritsar; and what discussions Her Majesty’s Government have had with the Government of India about this incident?”. Ray Whitney, then Parliamentary Under Secretary, replied that “the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has received petitions and numerous letters from the Sikh community in the United Kingdom about recent events in the Punjab. As this is an internal Indian matter, we have not sought to discuss it with the Indian Government.” My view is that the Parliamentary Question and Mr Whitney’s reply were almost certainly directed at the question of UK-Indian discussions post the storming of the temple complex, and therefore in this context Mr Whitney did not mislead Parliament. This is reinforced by the fact that neither Mr Whitney nor his office were copied any of the relevant papers on the UK military officer’s earlier visit in February, which was treated as Top Secret. Mr Whitney is now deceased.

CONCLUSIONS

23. My overall conclusions are based on the available written records in UK government files 30 years after Operation Blue Star, and discussion with officials involved at the time. My conclusions focus on the facts of the extent of any UK assistance. They do not make a subjective assessment of whether that assistance should have been provided. Nor do they assess the Indian Government's decisions on whether and how to conduct the operation; or how UK-Indian relations developed following the tragic events at Amritsar. My conclusions are as follows:

- (i) the UK Government did send one military officer to provide military advice on Indian contingency plans for an operation at Sri Harmandir Sahib.
- (ii) This military advice was a one-off. It was not sustained.
- (iii) There was no other UK military assistance, such as training or equipment, to the Indians with Operation Blue Star.
- (iv) The UK Government did not link the provision of this military advice to defence sales. The decision to help was taken in response to a request for advice from a country with which the UK had – and has – a close relationship.
- (v) The military advice from the UK officer had limited impact in practice. The actual operation implemented by the Indian Army

differed significantly from the approach suggested by the UK military officer.

24. In support of these conclusions, I recommend the public release of the documents in annexes B to F. They include the specific letters referred to in the already released documents. In line with the practice under successive governments we do not release information relating to the intelligence agencies or special forces.

JEREMY HEYWOOD

3 February 2014

Documents attached to the report *(a number of limited redactions have been made on national security grounds and relevance to the report)*

- Annex A Chronology of UK/Indian contact over Operation Blue Star
- Annex B MOD Submission of 3 February 1984 seeking Ministerial approval for a military adviser to travel to India and provide advice to the Indian authorities on early contingency planning to remove occupiers from the temple complex at Amritsar.
- Annex C Letter of 3 February 1984 from Private Secretary/Foreign Secretary to the Principal Private Secretary/No. 10 outlining plan for a military adviser to travel to India and provide advice to the Indian authorities. The note from Robin Butler to Brian Fall of 6 February 1984, which was released on 3 January 2014, is the response to this letter.
- Annex D Letter of 23 February 1984 from Private Secretary/Foreign Secretary to the Principal Private Secretary/No. 10 reporting on the outcome of the UK military adviser's visit. The letter from Brian Fall to the Private Secretary/Home Secretary of 23 February 1984, which was released on 3 January 2014, referred to the content of this report.
- Annex E Internal FCO minute of 7 March 1985, which attaches an earlier internal (undated) note recording views of the Indian Intelligence Co-ordinator on the role of the UK military adviser and Operation Blue Star.
- Annex F Mrs Gandhi's letter of 14 June 1984 to Mrs Thatcher, which sets out her reasons for ordering operation Blue Star.

Annex A

| <u>Chronology of UK/Indian contact over Operation Blue Star</u> | |
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| 15 Dec 1983 | A large number of dissidents fortify Sri Harmandir Sahib complex at Amritsar. |
| 15/16 Dec 1983 | Indian Intelligence Co-ordinator meetings in London. No discussion of Sri Harmandir Sahib. |
| 30 Jan 1984 | A request is received from the Indian Intelligence Co-ordinator for UK operational advice to assist with the ongoing situation at the temple complex. |
| 2- 3 Feb 1984 | Approval is sought and granted by the Foreign and Defence Secretaries for a UK military adviser to travel to India to assist. |
| 3 - 6 Feb 1984 | Further approval is sought from the PM and granted |
| 8 – 17 Feb 1984 | Visit of UK military adviser to India, including a recce to Sri Harmandir Sahib. A short report is submitted to the Indian Authorities with high level recommendations and advice. |
| 17 Feb 1984 | Unrelated exchange of fire between Indian security forces and the occupiers of Sri Harmandir Sahib. |
| 21 Feb 1984 | UK military adviser submits a visit report to UK authorities |
| 4 June 1984 | JIC assessment that states the UK had been given no warning of the Indian Authorities launching an operation at the Temple |
| 5 – 7 June 1984 | Indian Authorities undertake military operation to remove the dissidents from Sri Harmandir Sahib, named Operation Blue Star |
| 14- 29 June 1984 | Exchange of letters between Mrs Gandhi and Mrs Thatcher about events in the Punjab. |