

## XTRA COCKPIT CHAT

## A FLIGHT OF FAITH

The lives of two young men are changed when a pilot makes an unusual call

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IT WAS time to start the engines to fly from Seoul to Vancouver. The aeroplane had come from Singapore and more than 200 passengers were on transit to travel on to Canada.

The Singapore Airlines (SIA) ground staff rushed to the flight deck and gave the bad news. While doing random checks of passenger passports for valid visas, they had hit the jackpot. Two young Indians had no passports, let alone visas.

"Captain, no passports, cannot go!" the SIA man blurted. "Must offload!" he rattled off in excitement. "No passports, no visas, and cannot even speak English!"

This was a new one for me: Passengers trying to fly across continents without passports. I went to have a look.

Two turbaned young Sikh men were standing near the entrance to the economy class section, eyes downcast. It did not need much imagination to figure out their story. These were the modern-day Dick Whittingtons, going anywhere to look for gold in fabled streets.

No other way to their dreamland except by resorting to a desperate gimmick to try to hoodwink the airlines so they can reach their imaginary heaven's gate. These people had packed their dreams and taken the giant leap to seek refugee status in a distant land. A familiar story.

The Indian subcontinent is notorious for such all-or-nothing adventurers who pawn every possible belonging to make the journey to a First World country, hoping to carve meaning out of the mere existence that they call "life".

When spoken to, the two offenders semi-rotated their heads to imply, "we don't understand". I knew they were lying; there are no trouser-clad Indians who cannot understand at least a smidgen of English. They had worked out their game plan well, I thought. Get into the aeroplane, throw the passports away, get off in Vancouver and claim refugee status. Only one miscalculation: A random spot-check by the SIA ground staff.

An interpreter was sought, whereupon 20 Indians came forward. The one selected took his job seriously and conducted the question-and-answer session like a ping pong ball between me and the two Sikhs.

But there was really nothing to ask, nothing to say. It was an open-and-shut case and the only decision to make was to offload the two Dick Whittingtons, and send them to whatever hell awaited them in Seoul. A simple solution, and a



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norm in the airline world. For me, it was a hard call.

I, too, have eaten salt and bread in my younger days and known the feeling of despair that propagates such acts of desperation. These young men boldly sought a new life in a better world. They were not going to Canada to snowboard on the mountains at Whistler or to discuss how the ozone layer should be protected while camping at Stanley Park. Nor were they going to participate in discussions on Quebec's separation from the mainland.

The most they hoped for was some hovel somewhere to call home, and if they were lucky, to drive a yellow cab and be able to send money home to their families in some village in India. That was the sum total of their travel plan.

"You should offload these two, that's for sure," I agreed with the station staff.

"But the safety of this aircraft and

its passengers are my primary considerations," I said, adding: "We have to be careful in these critical times. How could we know these two have not planted a bomb somewhere in this aeroplane?"

"Remember the Sikh bombers who blasted the Air India flight over the Atlantic?" I emphasised the seriousness of the situation.

The obvious solution was to get them off the plane and then search it thoroughly to ensure we would not be blown up somewhere above the Pacific. Such a time-consuming search meant a possible crew change due to flight-time limitations. This was serious business — finding a new crew in Seoul was a difficult task.

I short-circuited the problem. "Why don't we let the Canadian authorities handle the matter?" I suggested.

"SIA may be fined \$2,000 but will

also save on the thousands of dollars that a delay may incur. The aircraft will be safe, and the passengers will arrive safely without complaint, thus safeguarding the all important 'on time' record of the company."

The ground manager thought hard, wondering if he should contradict me. But he saw the bigger picture. Surely, the two Sikhs would not have planted a bomb on a plane they so badly wanted to be on. Searching aeroplanes, delaying flights and changing crews were certainly not in his game plan.

"Good idea, Captain. As long as you are willing to take them, I am happy to let them go," he said, as he stepped off the plane.

We closed the doors and I tapped the two young men, saying: "I know you speak English, I know what this is all about. I'll take you to Vancouver. Now, go back to your seats and enjoy the flight."

They looked at me. No words, but their eyes said everything; they expressed relief and gratitude at their humble best.

We started the engines and rolled out of Seoul.

Vancouver appeared on schedule and the passengers disembarked, including the Whittingtons. As I walked past immigration, I saw them in a room with several uniformed officers. They saw me, too. With smiles as wide as the Pacific Ocean, they waved, hands gesturing in a wonderful farewell, the best possible good-bye from within a glass cage. I, too, waved back and silently wished them well, hoping the Canadians would be kind to them.

The two Sikhs would surely get their refugee status. Perhaps, they would go on to drive a yellow cab and be able to send money to their loved ones. And maybe, get them across to Canada, too. That would be the complete fairy tale.

SIA may have lost \$2,000 but flew a safer sky, saved much more on delay costs, and retained the all-important "punctuality" reputation.

It was my call and I am glad I made it. It is vital to uphold the scales of justice. But, as professionals, there are times when we can temper them to accommodate the humanitarian aspects of any "not in the book" situation.

I salute SIA for having trusted me and given me the responsibility to make such decisions.

*The writer served SIA for 19 years as a 747 captain and instructor. He is also the founder and president of humanitarian organisation Aflac International, which helps people suffering from multiple burdens of poverty. Visit [www.aflacinternational.com](http://www.aflacinternational.com) for more information.*