



# UNITED STATES ATTORNEY'S OFFICE

## FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

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## PRESS RELEASE

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[Jordanian hijacker pleads guilty in deadly 1986 hijacking of Pan Am Flight 73 and agrees to serve three consecutive life terms plus 25 years in jail](#)

**Washington, D.C.** - Attorney General John Ashcroft, United States Attorney Roscoe C. Howard, Jr., and Michael A. Mason, Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI's Washington Field Office, announced that Zaid Hassan Abd Latif Safarini, 41, a citizen of Jordan, pleaded guilty today before U.S. District Judge Emmet G. Sullivan to all 95 counts, including conspiracy to murder United States Nationals outside the United States and placing a destructive device on an aircraft resulting in death, of the superseding indictment charging him with crimes committed in connection with the deadly hijacking of Pan American Flight 73 on September 5, 1986, in Karachi, Pakistan. There were approximately 379 people on board the aircraft at the time of the hijacking, including approximately 78 United States citizens. At least twenty people were killed during the hijacking, including citizens of the United States, Pakistan, India and Mexico.

"The Department of Justice is committed to prosecuting terrorists who threaten and plot the destruction of innocent lives," said Attorney General John Ashcroft. "The criminal conviction, life sentence, and cooperation secured by today's guilty plea reinforce our commitment to bringing all perpetrators of terrorist plots to justice, no matter how long it takes."

Under the plea agreement announced in court today, the government has agreed not to further litigate the Court's prior ruling that the death penalty was not available in this case in exchange for Safarini agreeing to the following terms, among other things: (1) a guilty plea to all 95 counts of the indictment; (2) an agreement that Safarini will be sentenced to the maximum term of imprisonment on each count, with some counts to run consecutively and some to run concurrently, for a total sentence of three consecutive life sentences plus 25 years, which is equivalent to 160 years in prison; (3) an agreement that, as the result of the consecutive sentencing, there will be no mandatory parole release date for Safarini during his lifetime; (4) an acknowledgment that, despite the fact that Safarini will have a right to parole proceedings under governing law at the time the hijacking took place, the government intends to oppose his release on parole at any time during his lifetime; (5) an agreement by Safarini to waive any appeal of the sentence, to waive any collateral attack on the plea or the sentence and to forego any motion for reduction of sentence; and (6) an agreement that Safarini will cooperate "whenever, and in whatever form, the United States shall reasonably request," including by testifying against his co-defendants, if and when any of them comes into United States custody.

Judge Sullivan had ruled in April 2003 that the death penalty was not available against Safarini in this case. The government had filed a motion asking the Court to reconsider that ruling and the government's motion was still pending at the time this plea agreement was announced. A sentencing date has now been set for May 12, 2004, at which hearing Judge Sullivan will decide whether to accept the terms of the plea agreement, including the agreed-upon sentence.

"This is a great day for justice," said U.S. Attorney Roscoe C. Howard, Jr., "especially for the many surviving victims and family members and friends of those who lost their lives in this horrific incident. Although their nightmare occurred more than 17 years ago, today's successful resolution of the matter demonstrates our unrelenting commitment and deep resolve to ensure that justice is achieved. The United States of America never forgets."

The hijacking of Pan Am Flight 73 was one of the most brutal international terrorist attacks to occur in the 1980s. The incident began as passengers were boarding the aircraft for a flight that had originated in Bombay, India, and was scheduled to fly to Frankfurt, Germany, en route to New York. In court today, Safarini admitted under oath to a detailed factual account of the crime read by Assistant United States Attorney Gregg A. Maisel. Safarini admitted that he and his fellow hijackers were dressed as Karachi airport security guards and armed with assault rifles, pistols, grenades and plastic explosive belts when, at approximately 6:00 a.m. local time, Safarini drove a van that had been modified to look like an airport security vehicle through a security checkpoint at the Karachi airport, without challenge, and drove up to one of the stairways being used to board passengers for Pan Am Flight 73. Safarini and his three fellow hijackers stormed up the stairways onto the plane, fired shots from an automatic weapon and seized control of the aircraft. Some of the flight attendants were able to alert the cockpit crew about the hijacking by intercom, allowing the pilot, co-pilot and flight engineer to escape through a hatch in the cockpit before the hijackers reached the cockpit, thereby effectively grounding the aircraft.

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Over the next approximately 16 hours, Safarini, as the leader of the hijackers on board the aircraft, demanded the return of a flight crew to fly the aircraft to Larnaca, Cyprus, where Safarini and his fellow hijackers wanted to secure the release of Palestinian prisoners being detained in Cyprus. During the course of negotiations between Safarini and Pakistani authorities, Safarini threatened to kill all of the passengers.

Safarini admitted at the plea proceeding that, within a short time after seizing control of the aircraft, he ordered the flight attendants to collect the passports of passengers. The flight attendants complied with this request but, risking their own lives, they surreptitiously declined to collect some of the United States passports and hid other United States passports from the hijackers. After the passports had been collected, Safarini walked through the cabin of the aircraft, asking passengers about their nationalities. When he arrived at the seat of Rajesh Kumar, a 29-year-old California resident who had recently been naturalized as an American citizen, Safarini ordered Mr. Kumar to come to the front of the aircraft, to kneel at the front doorway of the aircraft and to face the front of the aircraft with his hands behind his head. Approximately four hours into the hijacking, Safarini became angry about the delay in complying with his demand for a new flight crew and he threatened that he would shoot Mr. Kumar if something was not done within 15 minutes. Shortly thereafter, Safarini grabbed Mr. Kumar and shot him in the head in front of witnesses both on and off the aircraft. Safarini then heaved Mr. Kumar out of the door onto the tarmac below. Pakistani personnel on the tarmac reported that Mr. Kumar was still breathing when he was placed in an ambulance, but he was pronounced dead shortly after arriving at a hospital in Karachi.

As the hours wore on and nightfall came, the lights on the aircraft began to dim and flicker, due to a mechanical failure. Safarini admitted that, at his instruction, the hijackers herded the passengers and crew members into the center section of the aircraft. Safarini and one other hijacker positioned themselves in front of the crowd of passengers in the right and left aisles, while the two other hijackers positioned themselves behind the crowd of passengers and crew in the right and left aisles. On Safarini's signal, after the hijackers recited a martyrdom prayer in Arabic, and after the lights on the aircraft had gone out, the four hijackers opened fire on the assembled passengers and crew, throwing hand grenades into the crowd and spraying the trapped passengers with automatic weapons fire, attempting to kill as many passengers and crew members as possible. At least nineteen additional passengers and crew were killed during this final deadly assault, including a second United States citizen, 50-year-old Surendra Patel, the father of three children, two of whom were next to him on the aircraft when he was shot. Scores of other passengers were injured. Most of the surviving passengers and crew, including 76 United States citizens, escaped through two doors of the plane which were forced open by heroic passengers and flight attendants when the firing began. Many passengers and crew were forced to jump from the wing of the aircraft onto the tarmac in order to escape the hijackers.

At the plea proceeding, Safarini admitted that he and his fellow hijackers committed the offenses charged in this case as members of the Abu Nidal Organization, also called the ANO, a foreign terrorist organization. Safarini and the other hijackers were initially prosecuted in Pakistan and convicted of numerous crimes resulting from the hijacking. Safarini served 15 years in prison in Pakistan before being released by Pakistani authorities and then apprehended by United States law enforcement personnel in late September 2001.

Survivors of Pan Am Flight 73 and family members of people who were killed aboard Pan Am Flight 73 are encouraged to contact the United States Attorney's Office for further information about this prosecution through an e-mail address established for this purpose: [PanAm.73@usdoj.gov](mailto:PanAm.73@usdoj.gov).

In announcing today's plea, Attorney General Ashcroft, United States Attorney Howard, and Assistant Director in Charge Mason commended the investigative work of FBI Special Agents R. Brad Deardorff, Michael

O'Callaghan, Gregory Naples and Scott Jessee, as well as numerous other FBI agents who contributed to this investigation over the course of many years. In addition, they commended U.S. Attorney's Office Victim-Witness Unit Chief Heather Cartwright and victim-witness advocate Gregory Nelson for their continuing work with the victims of Pan Am Flight 73. They also commended U.S. Attorney's Office employees Eugene Lee, LaTasha Sams, Karen Evans, Debbie Dunn, Amy Kline and Karen Kress and legal intern Margaret Sewell for their support on the case. Finally, they commended Assistant U.S. Attorney Gregg A. Maisel and DOJ Trial Attorney Jennifer E. Levy, the prosecutors handling the case.

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