



MV Safer cargo ship. Inset photos: Indian refugees onboard MV Safer

Photos courtesy Hanif Modak

## Kuwait Invasion

### Historic evacuation of 722 Indian refugees from war zone

# Escape to freedom: The unsung heroes of MV Safer

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Aug 2, 1990, brought unimaginable miseries and trauma to Kuwait. The tiny Gulf country was racked by destruction, torture, murder, loot and rape, accounts of which according to 'Newsweek' read like an anthology of Iraqi insanity. But out of the cauldron of pain, anger, violence and betrayal emerged unclaimed narratives of empathy, courage, generosity, compassion, cooperation and fortitude. The story of the Panamanian cargo ship MV Safer and its historic evacuation of 722 Indian refugees from Iraq occupied Kuwait fits into this context of unsung heroism.

Owned by Oyster Marine Management, a private shipping company formed by Non Resident Indians, MV Safer, which was manned by a modest crew of 26 Indians, carried 722 people, including men, women, and children through the troubled waters of Kuwait to Dubai, from where they were later flown back to India by the national carrier courtesy the Indian government. The journey and days of preliminary groundwork on part of the Master, crew, ship-owners, Indian Embassy, and various government agencies is a laudable example of synergic cooperation in the face of enormous danger.

MV Safer left the port of Kandla in Gujarat on July 24, 1990, with a full cargo of bagged rice. Captained by Zain Abedin Juvale, and supported by his team of twenty-six seafarers, the ship arrived at an uneventful Shuwaikh Port on July 31. Soon after docking, the ship crew began the process of discharge, which continued the next day. On Aug 2, disaster struck when nearly 100,000 Iraqi troops and 700 tanks drove into Kuwait at 2 am local time. Saddam Hussein had embarked on an insane and murderous course. He had invaded Kuwait.

In the days that followed, chaos, mayhem, and violence descended on Kuwait, and it became the cynosure of world attention. Captain Nazir Mulla, who served as First Officer on MV Safer recalls, "The crew learned of the invasion through the radio." It had been an uncannily quiet day at the port, but soon that changed. "The port was shaken by blasts of firing from all directions, and Iraqi troops with machine guns were seen taking positions." In a while, Iraqi fighter planes flew over the ship at "close range" leaving the crew "confused" and panic-stricken. The men waited in fear, uncertain of what was to come. "There was some relief after the fighter planes passed over without dropping bombs or causing any damage to the ship and crew," says Capt Nazir Mulla, who is now in Mumbai.

The next day, the crew was confronted by a group of gun-toting Iraqi soldiers. "We were forced to line up on the wharf with our hands above our heads in surrendered position. The Iraqi soldiers ordered us to separate into two groups of officers and crew. I was in working overalls. Looking at the blank faces of the crew, I decided to stay with them to keep their morale high," remembers Capt Nazir Mulla. "The group of officers was taken outside in a military van. After half an hour, the van came back with the officers. The soldiers then instructed the crew to go back on the ship and stay indoors without any activities on board. After a couple of days, the Iraqi authorities boarded the vessel and expressed their intentions to offload the cargo." The ship was placed under Iraqi army detention.

Back in India, and Dubai, the Indian owners of the ship were yet unaware of the drama

unfolding in the Gulf nation. They heard of the invasion from news channels and their agent in Kuwait who called to inform them of the presence of Iraqi troops marching on the streets. But the phone line broke, as did all other means of communication. The owners frantically tried to establish contact but were not successful. "After the invasion, all phones went dead. Communication with the outside world or even within the port was not possible," says Capt Nazir Mulla. When asked if the Master and the crew felt discouraged with the turn of the events, he answers, "Although the first few days were tense, we did not lose hope. We kept our minds positive and maintained high morale among the crew." But the men were desperate to get out of the warzone.

#### Missions

Meanwhile, the Embassy of India in Kuwait like the other missions was still trying to make sense of the disastrous events that were unfolding. In 1990, there were more than 170,000 Indian residents in Kuwait, the largest non-Arab expatriate community in the country. Their lives like that of other expatriates had come to a standstill. "My life was shattered when the invasion took place," sighed Ratna Maitra, who delivered a baby a few days before the attack. "We were one of the first to witness the atrocities and carnage of the Iraqi invasion. There were bomb blasts, and dead bodies of Kuwaiti soldiers killed near the palace were piled inside pickups. The sight of fresh blood and the terror and uncertainty of those days have left their mark on me," she says shaking her head. Thousands of Indians flooded the Embassy seeking help for evacuation.

On Aug 5, Suresh Mal Mathur, Second Secretary at the Indian Mission received a request from Capt Abedin Juvale, Master of MV Safer, asking for an Embassy official to visit the ship as the Indian crew was in "distress." Responding to the request, Mathur boarded the ship on August 11 after an arduous round of permissions from the Iraqis. In his blog, the former diplomat who was involved in evacuation work in Kuwait, Basra and Amman notes, "Captain Juvale made two specific requests: Inform the ship's owners and the families of the crew of their plight, request the Iraqi authorities to allow cargo to

be unloaded and permit 'Safer' to sail from Kuwait. He also suggested that the cargo ship carries as many Indians as possible from Kuwait to Dubai."

But it was easier said than done. A herculean task in the circumstances, it depended on joint effort on the part of the ship-owners, the Indian embassy, government authorities and the ship crew. At that time, Captain V R Kekobad, director of Oyster Marine Management and one of the ship-owners was in Mumbai. Along with Hanif Modak, son of late Capt Ibrahim Modak, joint owner of MV Safer, he worked hard at setting the wheels in motion in India, while Capt Ibrahim Modak coordinated efforts with various authorities from the company's office in Dubai. Captain Kekobad began negotiating with various government bodies including the Shipping Ministry and the Ministry of External Affairs India. The shutting down of communication line made matters complicated. "The Indian Embassy was in contact with the Ministry of External Affairs New Delhi by a ham radio," recalls Hanif Modak. "Capt V. R. Kekobad sent and received messages through the Ministry of External Affairs New Delhi to the Indian Embassy in Kuwait which was further conveyed to the Master and vice versa."

#### Release

MV Safer remained docked at Shuwaikh port for thirty-five long days. For the ship crew, it was a period fraught with danger and uncertainty. Was the team prepared for the long wait? Captain Kekobad, who lives in Australia replies, "The crew had only two options. Option one was to stay on board and wait till arrangements for the release of the vessel were agreed upon and completed. Option two was to abandon the ship and go via the land route to Amman where the remaining Indians from Kuwait were airlifted through the world record evacuation of more than 170000 Indians by the Government of India." The crew decided to wait for the evacuation plan to actualize.

But the decision to carry hundreds of people to safety must not have been easy. After all, the company and the master were essentially responsible for the safety of the ship and its crew. What led them to go that extra mile and accept the responsibility for the safety of hundreds of

According to a Special Report filed in 'India Today' in 1991 around 7,000 Indians stayed back in Kuwait during the Gulf War. They were a study in 'courage', 'defiance and organization skill.' During the war three hundred of them went missing, most of them in Iraqi jails. Two died in a bombing raid on a hospital. Most Indian homes were looted by the Iraqis and their collaborators. Scores of women were raped, but they did not disclose it for fear of social humiliation.

Moreover, the ship-owners also refused any financial compensation for this high-risk mission. Capt Nazir Mulla explains, "The master and the crew agreed to the rescue plan without any hesitations and without compromising their own safety. This was the only best option for the crew to move out safely with their ship. This was also a golden opportunity for the crew to extend help to needy Indians who desperately wanted to move out of the war zone."

After rounds of intense discussions in India and Kuwait, all parties involved agreed on the evacuation plan and logistics. In New Delhi, K.P. Fabian, Joint Sec of the Ministry of External Affairs played a critical role in the effort. He raised the evacuation as a priority issue in front of Inder Kumar Gujral, the Indian Foreign Minister, who made it a point to personally have a conference with the Master of MV Safer. K.P. Fabian also used his good offices to get the various government agencies and support systems on board for the evacuation.

The plan was to evacuate 722 Indians to safety. The passengers who made it to the ship were chosen on the basis of their perceived vulnerability in the circumstances. "The Indian Embassy oversaw the evacuation plans," informed Capt Kekobad. "As per the information obtained from Mr Mathur, the job of selecting the passengers was entrusted to the transport committee of the Indian community. There were at least 500 Indians needing urgent evacuation, who were to be handled with care. They included extremely sick persons, some of them in ICUs and heavily pregnant women. Many of the passengers selected were from this group of people. They were selected in consultation with doctors and every medical case was notified to the captain. The rest of the passengers was selected on the basis of priorities already decided by the Indian community and the embassy." Shireen Kanchwala's mother-in-law who been visiting Kuwait was one of the passengers, and Shireen, a long time resident of Kuwait recalls seeing many such vulnerable passengers who were either visitors or residents on the ship.

#### Challenge

But before the ship sailed, it had to be prepared for the journey. A cargo vessel, MV Safer was not equipped to carry passengers. The Master, Capt Zuvalle and the crew started work on modifying facilities. "The ship was designed to accommodate 25-30 crew and it was accordingly equipped with cooking facilities and toilets. The biggest challenge was to make sanitary arrangements for so many passengers," recalls Capt Nazir Mulla, First Officer of MV Safer. "Drums were cut and moulded to make commodes and welded on deck to dispose of sewage directly into the sea. Steel pipes were erected and covered with gunny bags to create cubicles. A plan was made to accommodate male passengers in No.1, 2 and 3 holds while

women, children, old people were to be kept in No.4 hold for easy access." Life jackets and life rafts were also made available for safety.

On Sept 4, 1990, thirty-five days after berthing, MV Safer left Kuwait. On this trip instead of rice bags, it carried anxious and traumatized people. "The vessel carried about 272 female and children and 450 male passengers. The passengers included nine pregnant women, six lady doctors, and ten nurses. The pregnant women and infants were placed in the ship's accommodation which was air-conditioned. The youngest child on board was 34 days old," informs Capt Nazir Mulla.

The passengers included Tanweer Khalfay, who travelled on the ship with his family. Khalfay was a member of the Indian citizen group that had formed in the wake of the invasion. "Many Indians in Kuwait were aware of the possibility of travel by ship, and they got involved in the process," he recalls. "We helped in working out the passenger list, procuring cartons of food for the voyage, and arranging transport for families that did not have cars." Despite days of anxious preparation and anticipation, the voyage went off smoothly. "The journey was peaceful and everyone helped in preparing and distributing the food. The only risk I was told on the second day was if any mines were placed by Iraq to thwart US attack," says Khalfay. Sharing his memory of the fateful journey, Capt Nazir Mulla says, "The crew remained on their toes carrying out vigilant fire patrol and looking after the needs of the passengers. The ship's galley kept running round the clock providing khichdi to needy passengers although many carried dry food with them." Hiten Advani was also on the ship with his family. During the invasion, Advani, an Indian based in Los Angeles lived in Kuwait. "We saw a few killings that took place there, but with God's grace we were able to come out very peacefully and reach our destination safely." The journey is sharply etched in his mind. He remembers the "soaring temperatures" in the hold, and the collective effort of the passengers and the crew. "I would like to thank Captain Zainul Abedin Juvale for his kindness and for taking us safely to Dubai, and the Indian government for their prompt action after we reached Dubai. The captain and the crew took exceptional care of everyone on board."

MV Safer reached Dubai on Sept 6 and berthed at Port Rashid Dubai on Sept 7. The ship-owners boarded the vessel at anchorage along with doctors and other help. They carried with them 1000 packed meals and water bottles for the passengers. The ship was given a rousing welcome. "The wharf was crowded with people carrying video cameras," recalls Capt Nazir Mulla. "People threw water bottles and biscuit packets on the deck for the passengers. A 34 days old infant disembarked first followed by the women and male passengers." Later in the day, the rescued Indians continued their journey home when they were airlifted from Dubai by the Indian government.

The rescue of 722 Indians by a cargo ship at the beginning of the Gulf War somehow got lost in the larger and more lauded narrative of the evacuation of 175,000 Indians by the Indian Government. But undoubtedly, the historic story of MV Safer, the extraordinary effort of its Master, crew, and owners who also provided free passage to 722 people stranded in a war zone is an incredible account of bravery, endeavour, empathy, generosity and resilience. It is a story that should be celebrated, and the bravery of its not so ordinary heroes should be honoured.



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