

Finial from Flagpole of U.S. Embassy Islamabad, Pakistan 1979

Transfer from Bureau of Overseas Building Operations, Department of State



This finial is from a flagpole at the U.S. Embassy Islamabad, which was burned down in an attack on November 21, 1979. Its charred surface demonstrates that diplomatic immunity crumbles when volatile conditions prevail and diplomats all over the world can at any time face sudden, unexpected and life-threatening danger.

Two weeks after Iranian students took the U.S. Embassy staff hostage in Tehran, Iran under the leadership of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan was attacked in a brief but violent siege. The immediate impetus came from false rumors spread by Ayatollah Khomeini that the United States had participated in the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca the day before. U.S. Marine Security Guards, not authorized to fire on protesters, guided embassy personnel—about half Pakistani and half U.S. citizens—into a safe room vault. The Marines discharged tear gas as protesters set fire to the building. Eventually the mob dispersed that evening. Marine Security Guard Steven Crowley, Army Warrant Officer Bryan Ellis, and two Pakistani Foreign Service Nationals died during the assault.

The burnished flagpole finial was found later while rebuilding the embassy, a silent witness to the fire's terrible heat and to a day of terror for the embassy staff and visitors. Later Pakistani President Zia apologized for the assault.



Map of Pakistan



A Pakistani Army helicopter hovers over burning U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, 1979
AP Photo