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Airlift, starring Akshay Kumar, was shot largely in Ras Al Khaimah and Sharjah last year. Courtesy B4U Motion Pictures

In Airlift, Akshay Kumar becomes a real-life hero who must never be forgotten

and most-successful evacuation.

Priti Salian

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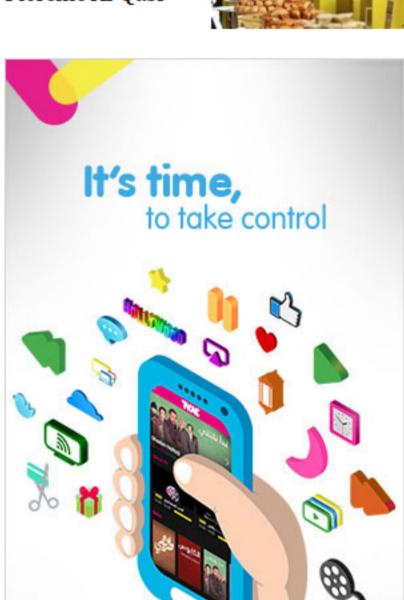
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Bollywood's best-loved action star, Akshay Kumar, is back on the big screen – this time starring as a real-life businessman with a heart of gold who, during Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, led one of the world's largest

In Airlift, Kumar plays Ranjit Katyal, a Kuwait resident who put his life at risk to help the Indian government fly home about 170,000 stranded expatriates when the war erupted.

The film, which also stars Nimrat Kaur (Lunchbox), was shot largely in Ras

Al Khaimah and Sharjah last year, and Kumar says he enjoyed every minute of it. "It's always nice shooting [in the UAE]," he says, adding that the country

airport". "Plus, you just can't shoot like this in Mumbai," he says. "They won't close

fulfilled all the requirements, such as rough desert terrain and an "Arabian

Airlift is another intense thriller from Kumar, after Baby (2015) and Special 26 (2013), and the actor says it brought out the patriot in him.

a part of the street for you - they'd rather close down the shoot."

"Airlift deserves recognition," says the 48-year-old. "Whether I am recognised or not, well, I leave that to the audience. But this is one real-life story that is worthy of being told.

"It is a heroic endeavour accomplished by average men with hearts of gold, and must appear in history books in schools. It is something to be very proud of."

How difficult was it for him to take on the role of Katyal? "There is always pressure on you when you have to slip into the shoes of a

real person," he says. "The great thing is, he was a phenomenal human being, and so it's an honour playing him." Unlike Bollywood superstars Aamir Khan, Shah Rukh Khan and Salman

Khan, who work on only one film a year – Kumar is a prolific actor who appears in three or more films a year. Airlift is his fifth in 12 months. "I don't like to put all my eggs in one basket," he says. "I'm not ready to

He also enjoys the diversity of roles that this approach allows him to play.

pray for just one humungous success a year – not yet, anyway."

"It keeps me on my toes and the audience happy, when they know I'm not dishing out the same kind of cinema in the hope that it will make money," he says.

happen to anyone who genuinely works hard".

His motivation, he says, comes from the belief that "great things can

Khanna – for her "positive influence on his professional life".

He also credits his wife – former actress and newspaper columnist Twinkle

"[She] is a huge support system for me," he says. "She was born into this industry and understands all its trials and tribulations. Without her, I wouldn't be able to do what I do."

up before 5am and rarely stays out late. "Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is hard but not impossible," he says. "I feel

Kumar is known for being one of the fittest actors in the industry. He wakes

my health is more important than having a good time." He is also not interested in making drastic changes to his body for the sake

of a film. "My health is of utmost importance," he says. "It's my way of life that allows me to work as hard as I do. The day I take that for granted will be the day

you'll see me live with regret – and I will make sure that day never dawns."

Kumar has an impressive list of upcoming films. This year, he will be seen in Housefull 3 and Rustom, while Namaste England (directed by Vipul Shah) and Ikka (directed by A.R. Murugadoss) are due next year.

But his biggest project is the sci-fi drama Robot 2.0, the seguel to Robot

"I can't wait to start shooting for Rustom," he says.

(2014), in which Tamil icon Rajinikanth will reprise his role from the first film, and Kumar will play the villain. The movie will reportedly be the most expensive Indian film ever made. "Robot 2.0, without doubt, is going to blow people's minds," says Kumar. "It

has already blown mine." What else does the future hold for Kumar?

"I try not to plan or think too far ahead," he says, adding that he hopes to

keep making films "for as long as my fans still want me". Neither does he have any plans to slow down.

"It's only a few weeks into January and I've been working non-stop – just the way I like it."

Airlift (Hindi, with English subtitles) is in cinemas now

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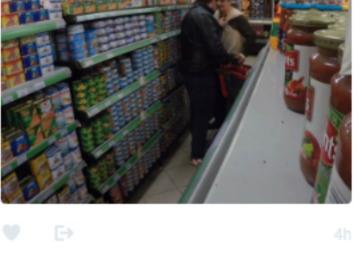
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