

What's next: Figuring out compensation to families

25 years later, federal government must now try to make up for Air India losses

BY ROBERT MATAS VANCOUVER

As the long Air India saga moves from inquiry to compensation, the looming question is at once painful and statistical: How much is a life worth?

One recommendation in the inquiry's final report is to pay compensation to the families of people killed in the terrorist bombings. During an hour-long meeting Thursday, Prime Minister Stephen Harper told the families that the federal government would respond positively to that proposal.

Assessing the loss of economic benefit from the death of a good earner with a family could easily reach \$1-million, Rob Carson, a senior consulting economist with Associated Economic Consultants Ltd., said Thursday. But the dollar figure would vary wildly from family to family, he added, as calculations are made of family income and expenses.

Personal injury lawyer Brahm Martz said compensation traditionally rests on the principle any payment is only for the economic support that would be expected to be provided to family members for a certain number of years. Despite the anguish of losing a son or daughter, nothing is normally paid out for the loss of a child, at least in British Columbia, Mr. Martz said.

Commissioner John Major said the families "in some ways, have often been treated as adversaries, as if they had somehow brought this calamity upon themselves." He added: "The time to right that historical wrong is now."

On Thursday, neither Mr. Harper nor Public Safety Minister Vic Toews elaborated on the form the compensation

would take. The government will spend the coming months reviewing the recommendations of the inquiry, Mr. Toews told reporters, offering no clues on whether the compensation will be to the individuals or to projects to commemorate the events.

As it is, most Air India victims families received compensation payments a few years after the bombing, based on what was known at that time about the circumstances surrounding the deaths. The payments were never officially announced. But documents released in response to Access to Information requests and interviews with family members showed the average payment was \$75,000 (U.S.) for each person who was killed. Some who lost high-income family members received more.

Michael Byers, the Canadian Research Chair in International Law and Politics, said some people may be calculating the political gain for the Conservative government to make the new commitment to compensation. But he saw the offer coming out of a sense of moral responsibility to those affected by the failures of government.

"This is a significant tragedy that did not resonate as deeply as it should have with Canadians," he said. The payments should be generous, to indicate to Canadians how serious it was and to reflect that the government failed to protect these Canadians.

The commitment is in step with recent federal initiatives following admissions of past injustices and serious negligence of government agencies.



In 1986, relatives of bombing victims stood at a memorial sundial in Ireland which throws its shadow on the exact time of the event on every anniversary. REUTERS

Ireland's south coast commemorate anniversary of Air India disaster alongside victims' families

BY ADRIAN MORROW

Every year, family members of the 329 people who were killed on Air India Flight 182 make a pilgrimage to a semi-rural corner of Ireland's rugged south coast, the closest piece of land to the spot where the jet came crashing into the sea.

And every year, the locals of the Sheep's Head peninsula are there to host them and join in a memorial service at water's edge on the anniversary of the disaster.

"The Irish hospitality we have seen is something we cannot forget in this lifetime – all the support and comfort," said Narayana (Babu) Turlapati, a Toronto accountant, on Thursday. "I don't think we would have had this kind of support if the plane had fallen anywhere else in the world."

Both of his sons, 14-year-old Sanjay and Deepak, 11, were en route to visit their grandparents when they were killed. Sanjay's body was recovered; Deepak was never

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found. Mr. Turlapati and his wife, Padmini, spend two weeks in the area nearly every year and visit with the locals.

"We come and sit and look at the ocean, and maybe our son is looking back at us," he said. "We just forget about the world."

The thread that connects families in Canada and India to this rocky headland, about 100 kilometres southwest of

Cork, was forged soon after the bombing on June 23, 1985, when the local council erected a monument to the dead at Ahakista, a hamlet on Sheep's Head.

Unveiled a year after the disaster, it is centred on a large sundial, angled so its shadow points in the direction of the crash site every year on the anniversary.

Michael Murphy, who helped supervise the monument's construction and maintenance for the country council, compares the yearly visitors to "extra family."

"I looked after it and I got very close with the families. We're very, very friendly," he said. He'll be having the Turlapatis over for drinks at his house Friday night and billeting other families.

In gratitude, several relatives of the victims pool their money into scholarships for teens from the area's secondary schools. This year, they will present four €200 awards.

Gary Bass, the head of the RCMP in British Columbia, reconnects every year with his

Irish counterparts, with whom he forged lasting friendships while investigating the case. He says the sheer size of the disaster left an impression on them all.

"The magnitude of the case, the enormity of the tragedy is something that's difficult to grasp," he said.

This year, 30 relatives of victims are expected. Most years, just three or four families of the victims join the locals for the service.

They observe a minute of silence at 8:12 a.m., the moment in local time when the plane went down, followed by prayers. Afterwards, locals serve a spread of tea, scones and apple tarts, a tradition dating back to the first memorial in 1986.

Beyond hospitality, John Connolly, mayor of nearby Bantry, hints at another reason the locals feel such kinship with the families of the victims.

"If that particular plane had been seven minutes sooner, it could have fallen down in a town near here," he said.