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Tragic lessons from Air India

Ramwati Gupta was the mainstay of a happy Toronto family before she boarded Air India flight 182 for Delhi 25 years ago this month. She “lived every breath of life” for her husband Bal and their sons. She’d remind him to smell the roses, and taught them to do their best.

When her plane was blown out of the sky by a terror bomb on June 23, 1985, with the loss of all 329 passengers and crew, “the news shattered our little world,” Bal Gupta would recall through a veil of tears, decades later. The family could only seek solace in prayer.

Nothing in former Supreme Court justice John Major’s exhaustive inquiry into Canada’s worst terrorist attack can ease the searing grief felt by the Guptas and other families who lost spouses, parents, siblings, children that dark day. The tragedy haunts us still.

But Major’s far-ranging report, released Thursday, is a memorial to the families’ “unimaginable suffering,” and to their inspiring tenacity in demanding redress. It is a much-deserved rebuke to those who obtusely treated what Major rightly termed “a Canadian atrocity” as an offshore “Indian” affair.

Major’s report is a relentless, withering indictment of the “error, incompetence and inattention” of Canada’s police and security services. Their turf wars sealed Air India’s fate. They refused to share information, failed to see the danger of Sikh extremism, were complacent about air security. Then they bungled the investigation and prosecution.

Finally, Major’s report is a forceful call to plug the gaps and shortcomings that *continue* to erode security even today.

Chillingly, Major castigates Ottawa for still failing “to recognize what went wrong, why, and what should be done today.” He calls for better cooperation between the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and other federal agencies.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper quickly promised the Air India families an apology and compensation, in line with Major’s proposals. But Public Safety Minister Vic Toews would commit only to weigh his other recommendations “very seriously.” He wouldn’t even commit to Major’s request that Ottawa set up a mechanism to report on how it deals with his proposals.

Chief among Major’s recommendations is having Harper’s national security adviser, Marie-Lucie Morin, play umpire for the security services. She would “supervise” and “coordinate” activities and “resolve disputes.” Whatever supervisory mechanism Ottawa settles on, the need to empower someone in authority to knock heads is sadly apparent.

Major also recommends that Ottawa appoint a dedicated Director of Terrorism Prosecutions, streamline the court process in terror cases and improve witness protection.

He proposes a raft of measures such as checks on staff and cargo to close gaps in airport security. He raises the old question of whether the RCMP should get out of provincial policing to focus on being a federal force. And he urges Ottawa to set up an academic centre to study terrorism.

Those most touched by the Air India tragedy welcomed these findings. “Canada will be a much safer place,” if Ottawa heeds the advice, Bal Gupta said Thursday.

If so, Canadians will owe a debt of gratitude to grieving families who demanded the truth and would settle for nothing less.