

Arrests welcomed, but can't bring back loved ones

CONAL MULLEN
Journal Staff Writer
EDMONTON

News that two men were arrested in the Air India crash has brought relief to some families of the dead, but it has not eased their loss.

"It's very painful," said Prabha Murthy, a Sherwood Park woman who lost her 13-year-old sister, Prathiba Ramachandran. "I wouldn't wish it on anybody."

Prathiba was returning home to Bombay after spending a holiday with Murthy in Edmonton. She was one of 329 people killed when Flight 182 crashed into the Atlantic Ocean off the Irish coast on June 23, 1985.

Murthy said she's glad the Canadian government has something to show after years of investigation.

"I'm just definitely filled with a sense of relief," she said Friday. Murthy was a few years married at the time and had invited her younger sister for a visit to Canada. The girl stayed two months, visiting Vancouver and Edmonton. She was on her way back to her parents when she died.

Ramachandran Srinivasa, Murthy's father-in-law, said Prathiba's parents lost their interest in life after the crash.

"Even to me it was a devastation," he said. "I knew her in India since she was born. I'm 80 years old. I'm living. How do I feel? Terrible. I have a life and a 13-year-old child is gone."

"I'm useless to society. This child had a whole life ahead of her. She was a very gifted child, a very intelligent child."

He said the two arrests Friday are little consolation. "How is it going to get this child back to us? How is it going to help?"

Srinivasa remembers speaking to the girl by telephone before she got on the plane. He told her to return and settle in Canada.

"They found the body in the sea. My son went all the way to Ireland. He went and identified the body."

Edmontonian Raju Kammila lost his 15-year-old daughter, Rama, in the crash. He said Friday all he hopes for now is that the guilty be brought to justice.

"Hopefully it'll be the right people," Kammila said. "At least it's coming to a conclusion."

His daughter was on her way to spend her summer holidays in India. The Grade 9 honours student was a lead flautist in the Steele Heights junior high school band, a co-winner of the school's music award and a glee club member.

Rama was travelling with her aunt and two cousins from Vancouver.

Liberal MP David Kilgour said he's sorry the investigation has taken so long. "The families have lived it for 15 years," he said. "They'll have to go on living it and reliving it. One's heart goes out to them from all of us."

As a former prosecutor, he warned that people must be careful how they view the situation.

"I'm worried that some people will say that because the two people charged happen to be of a particular origin, that it's the fault of the whole community, and that's completely unfair," Kilgour said.



June 20, 1985 — Dr. Zebuniska Jethva waves goodbye to relatives at Vancouver International Airport as she and her husband, Dr. Umar Jethva, prepare to board an Air India Flight 182 to New Delhi. Hours later they were dead when a bomb ripped the plane apart off the Irish coast.

Bombing of Flight 182 robbed families of future

Violin music ended when scientist lost wife, two daughters

BEV WAKE
Southam Newspapers

It's been more than 15 years since 18-year-old Harish Bhardwaj boarded Air India Flight 182, saying good-bye to his family members who weren't able to book tickets on the same flight.

They were all supposed to meet in India, where they planned to visit Bhardwaj's ailing grandmother.

Bhardwaj, of course, never arrived. The plane exploded off the coast of Ireland, killing all 329 people on board.

Friday, for the first time in 15 years, Gopal Bhardwaj was able to smile when he spoke about the tragedy. Although thinking about his nephew still, sometimes, brings tears to his eyes, he had just learned that two British Columbia men had been charged with murdering every person on board the flight.

"At one time, we'd lost all hope," he said. "This will give some sort of peace to the mind that at least

some people have been brought to justice. It's like walking in total darkness and seeing some light there."

Ottawa pediatrician Chandra Vaidyanathan lost her baby brother Krish in the crash. The 23-year-old had just graduated from Carleton University as the top student in mechanical engineering, and had been flying to India to bring his mother back to Canada to live with him.

Shail Paliwal lost his 15-year-old brother Mukul.

Ottawa scientist Anant Anantaraman lost his wife Bhawanit and daughters Aruna, 15, and Rupa, 12, in the crash. Both girls were exceptional violinists and Mr. Anantaraman had to grow used to the silence in his house, which had once been filled with the music of Mozart, Vivaldi, Bach and Schubert.

Every night after the girls had finished supper and done their homework, they would play their violins for their parents.

Although the bodies of the girls and their mother were never found, a violin case was recovered from the wreckage.

"We lost a nephew but other people lost total families," Gopal Bhardwaj said Friday. "Whole

communities were devastated."

Among the dead were 86 children. It's a tradition, Mr. Bhardwaj explains, to put your children on a plane in the summer and send them to visit grandparents and learn about their roots.

For the Bhardwaj family, the situation could have been much

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Gopal Bhardwaj

worse. Mr. Bhardwaj, his brother, two sons and Harish had all tried to book seats on the flight. Only one seat was available. Garish took it. The rest of the men flew to New York, taking a Pan Am flight instead. They didn't learn about Harish's death until they arrived in India.

"We saved our own lives," Mr. Bhardwaj said. "We were lucky, at the last minute, that we waited."

For the families of the victims, there were no funeral services, burials or cremations. Most of

them settled for a memorial service on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean in Ireland, about 100 km outside of Cork.

They weren't even able to take a 10-hour boat ride to the crash site, where they could be closer to their relatives. The mourners, who paid their own way to Ireland, weren't able to afford the \$60,000 it would have cost to hire a boat.

Since the crash, family members have held yearly memorial services at Commissioner's Park near Dow's Lake. Two red oak trees were planted as a memorial to the dead. There's also a copper-coloured plaque, containing the 329 gilded names of those who died.

Family members have also spent the last 15 years calling for justice.

For some, the lobbying efforts were all-consuming.

Mr. Paliwal's father, Yogesh, died on June 23, 1988, exactly three years — almost to the hour — after his son Mukul died in the crash.

He suffered a heart attack while making placards for a demonstration planned for later in the day at Parliament Hill.

Ottawa Citizen

TRACKING TERROR

1984

June: Sikhs around the world are outraged after India's government orders a raid on the seat of the Sikh faith, the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

1985

June 23: Air India Flight 182 explodes near Ireland, killing 329 people — 278 Canadians. An hour before the blast, two baggage handlers at Tokyo's Narita airport are killed when a bag explodes as it is being transferred to an Air India flight. RCMP link both blasts to the conspirators.

1986

Jan. 22: Canadian Aviation Safety Board says a bomb brought down the jet.

Feb. 4: India also concludes a bomb brought down the jet.

1991

May 10: Inderjit Singh Reyat is sentenced to 10 years in jail on manslaughter and explosives charges related to the Narita bombing.

1992

Bombing suspect Talwinder Singh Parmar, a preacher from Burnaby, killed in a shootout with Indian police officers. His supporters say he was executed.

1995

May: RCMP offer a \$1 million reward for help catching the bombers.

1996

Oct. 17: Prime Minister Jean Chretien rejects the idea of holding a royal commission into the Air India bombing, saying the crime is too old.

1997

April: National Parole Board panel denies Reyat parole.

June 1997: Police say they have almost concluded investigation and charges are likely soon.

Nov. 27: RCMP Commissioner Philip Murray blames delays in laying charges on complexities of dealing with other countries to gather evidence.

1998

February: RCMP Insp. Gary Bass, head of the Air India probe, says that investigators will recommend charges against Reyat and others.

March 7: National Parole Board panel denies Reyat early release.

March 25: Independent MP John Nunziata repeats longstanding call for a royal commission into the Air India disaster.

October 15: RCMP sends report to Crown lawyers to assess whether charges can be laid.

1999

April: Crown puts up posting, seeking to more than double the number of prosecutors working on case.

August: Access to information documents suggest as many as 1,000 witnesses might have to testify at any bombing trial.

2000

January: RCMP says it will review allegations that a former member of Canada's spy agency deliberately destroyed tapes related to the bombing.

Oct. 23: Two Vancouver-area men arrested to face murder, conspiracy charges in Air India bombings.

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