

'Bittersweet' day for families

Harper says sorry
on 25th anniversary
of terrorist attack

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With a bright late-evening sun shining down, families of the victims of the Air India bombing finally got an official apology — 25 years to the day that the disaster ripped apart their lives.

Standing at a memorial in Humber Bay Park on the edge of Lake Ontario on Wednesday night, Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized on behalf of the government and all Canadians for the “institutional failings of 25 years ago and the treatment of the victims’ families thereafter.”

For the families, it was an acknowledgement of their suffering.

“It’s bittersweet. Actually, it’s bitter,” said Ajax resident Mena D’Lima, whose 72-year-old father Sebastian Desa was on Flight 182, which exploded off the Irish coast killing all 329 aboard on June 23, 1985. “I’m not going to get him back.”

The hour-long ceremony included Premier Dalton McGuinty and Toronto Mayor David Miller as well as dignitaries from India, Ireland and Japan, where two Tokyo airport baggage handlers were killed the same day by a bomb intended for another Air India flight.

“It was comforting. It was a good reconciliation,” said P.D. Bhandarkar, whose sister Muktha Bhat and 9-year-old nephew Deepak were on the flight. Harper “took the bold step of having the inquiry and doing the right thing — the apology. Although we had to wait 25 years, it came through.”

Former Supreme Court justice John Major issued the final inquiry report last week. It was scathing, calling the disaster a “cascading series of errors.”



RICK MADONIK/TORONTO STAR

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Bal Gupta — who lost his wife in the bombing — Mayor David Miller and Premier Dalton McGuinty honour the Air India victims at a memorial in Humber Bay Park on Wednesday.



The report said the authorities should have known the flight could have been a terrorist target, blaming a turf war between the RCMP and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and glaring lapses in air security for failing to prevent the

tragedy. Harper emphasized that it was not an act of foreign violence. “This atrocity was conceived in Canada, executed in Canada, by Canadian citizens, and its victims were themselves mostly citizens of our country.”

Scarborough’s Nidhi Gaur, 20, was clutching three bunches of bright daisies with her sister Rushi Gaur, 23, in honour of their grandfather O.P. Sharma, a high school teacher.

“It’s really hard to see my father going through this,” she said of Ram Gaur, whose daughters were born after the tragedy. “It still lingers on. I don’t think you ever get over it, especially since justice was never served.”

Nagral and Vijayalakshmi Tum-

kur, whose son Rammohan, 20, and daughter Chitraklekha, 24, were killed, said the apology was “better late than never.”

“It’s high time,” said Vijayalakshmi Tumkur of Waterloo. “Nobody thought it was a Canadian tragedy.”

But Tumkur added they would like to hear similar apologies from previous prime ministers who have been silent for so long.

“It’s something they should have said. It’s maybe only because of the inquiry recommendations that there’s an apology — the previous politicians should be stepping forward. It happened in their time.”

SIDDIQUI: Begin reconciliation. **A23**