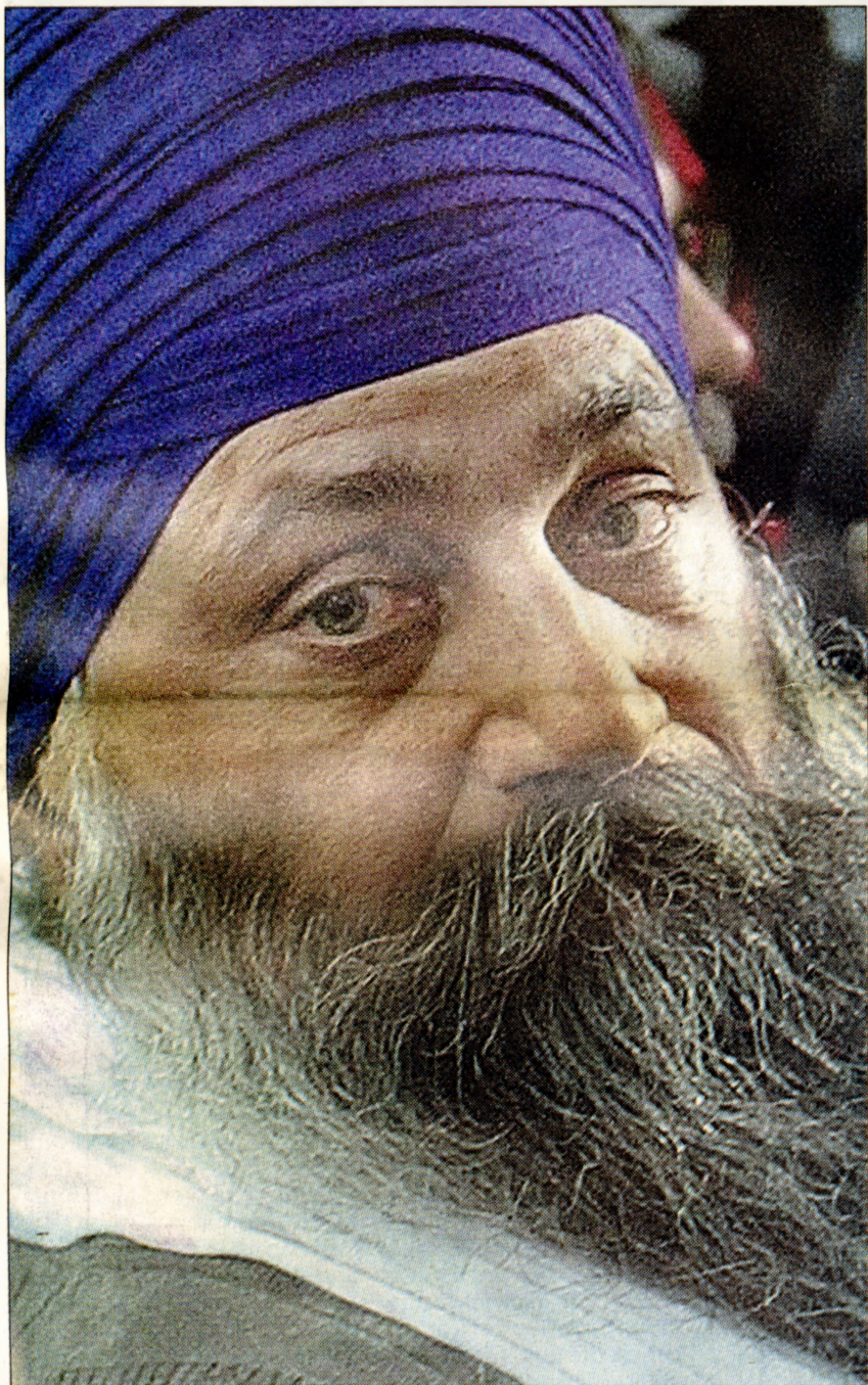


NOT GUILTY

AJAIB SINGH BAGRI



BILL KEAY / CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

‘Despite what appears to have been the best and most earnest of efforts by the police and the Crown, the evidence has fallen markedly short’

— JUSTICE IAN JOSEPHSON

RIPUDAMAN SINGH MALIK



LYLE STAFFORD / REUTERS

ANGRY RELATIVES DEMAND INQUIRY

Judge cites inconsistencies in evidence of 3 Air-India witnesses

By KIM BOLAN

VANCOUVER • Angry relatives of the victims of the Air-India terrorist plots that left 331 people dead demanded a public inquiry yesterday after the two men charged in the bombings were found not guilty.

Gasps of shock greeted B.C. Supreme Court Justice Ian Bruce Josephson's verdict that Ripudaman Singh Malik, 58, and Ajaib Singh Bagri, 55, were not guilty of conspiring to blow up two Air-India planes on June 23, 1985, in the worst mass murder in Canadian history. Both men walked out of court after four years in custody.

In a summary of his findings, Judge Josephson pointed to inconsistencies in the evidence of three key Crown witnesses, including a woman who is now in the witness protection program who said Mr. Malik confessed to her on more than one occasion.

The judge said he could not believe the woman claimed to still love Mr. Malik after he had allegedly taken responsibility

for such an act of mass murder.

“We have lost our families all over again,” said Sanjay Lazar, who was orphaned when his entire family perished in the bombing. “This time, it’s to the Canadian justice system.”

“We had sought only justice, not retribution,” he said.

John Chatlani, whose mother, baby brother and 13-year-old sister died on Air-India Flight 182, said the blame for what he called a “botched” investigation lays not only with the Crown.

“It was a collective effort by the Canadian government and the agencies involved,” Mr. Chatlani said.

The trial, he said, had made a “mockery” of his memories.

Maresh Sharma from Montreal joined a chorus of families who are calling for a public inquiry. “You think one man, one person, makes a decision. That’s not right,” said Mr. Sharma, who lost his wife and two children. “Somebody has to feel responsible for victims who lost 331 people.”

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It was Canada’s 9/11 and we blew it: victim’s daughter

By STEWART BELL

MISSISSAUGA, ONT. • Esther Venketeswaran was asleep in her parents’ room when her mother came home early from her nursing shift at Bethesda Home and said, “Something’s the matter with your father’s plane.”

They turned on the radio in the kitchen and listened as the CFRB announcer reported that an Air-India flight outbound from Canada had gone down off the coast of Ireland. All 329 on board were believed dead.

Friends took Esther, then 15, and her brother David, 13, to McDonald’s for breakfast and told them their father was strong and he might be out their somewhere clinging to a piece of debris, but she knew she would never see him again. “It just devastated us,” she said.

Yesterday, a B.C. judge found Ripudaman Singh Malik and Ajaib Singh Bagri not guilty of conspiring to plant the bomb that brought down Air-India Flight 182 on June 23, 1985.

“I had a feeling, so I’m not surprised,” Esther’s mother, Ann Venketeswaran, said after the verdict was read to stunned relatives in a Vancouver courtroom. “I feel very, very sad. I mean, somebody did it.”

Esther, now 34, said the verdict would not make any meaningful difference. She is angry at not only those behind the

bombing, but also a government she feels has neither confronted terrorism nor cared for its victims.

During an interview at her Mississauga apartment, her photos of her father spread on the coffee table next to the Bible she brought with her when she attended the trial in Vancouver, she noted that after the Palestine Liberation Organization murdered 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, Israel sent the Mossad secret service to hunt down the killers. After 9/11, George W. Bush declared war against terrorists.

Canada’s response to the Air-India bombing was by comparison “apathetic and indifferent,” she said. The police investigation faltered. Some Canadian Sikhs vehemently denied members of their community were involved.

It took Ottawa until 1996 to shut down a charity run by the suspected bombers. Criminal charges were not laid until 2000. The government did not get around to passing an anti-terrorism law until 2001, and the terrorist group behind the bombing, the Babbar Khalsa, was only officially designated as a terrorist group by Cabinet in June, 2003. Help for those whose lives were shattered by the tragedy was virtually nonexistent, she said.

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