

AIR INDIA CEREMONY

For the victims' families, a long-sought acknowledgment

BY ANTHONY REINHART

After 25 years of avoiding the mirror of accountability, Canada has turned to face its failure to stop the Air India bombing, with a full and powerful apology from Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

"This was evil, perpetrated by cowards, despicable, senseless and vicious," Mr. Harper said Wednesday evening at a Toronto ceremony for relatives of 329 people, most of them Canadians, whose plane was bombed out of the sky on June

23, 1985, killing all aboard. "I will make no attempt to make any sense of it."

What Mr. Harper did was give long-sought government acknowledgment that the bombing – the worst act of murder in the country's history – was a preventable, wholly Canadian crime, badly mishandled by intelligence and police agencies.

The tragedy was made worse when "the families were for years after treated with scant respect or consideration" by federal authorities. Mr. Harper pledged to act on recent find-

ings of an inquiry by Justice John Major, who was scathing in his criticism of Canada's response to Air India and deficiencies in its security apparatus.

"I stand before you, therefore, to offer on behalf of the government of Canada, and all Canadians, an apology," Mr. Harper said, as a uniformed member of the RCMP – an agency faulted for its role in bungling the investigation – stood behind him.

More than 100 family members, who gathered near an Air

India monument on the shores of Lake Ontario, applauded Mr. Harper's remarks.

Bal Gupta, who lost his wife in the bombing and represented families in their long campaign for answers, asked all to "work together to prevent recurrence of a similar tragedy."

Mr. Gupta read a message from Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who called the bombing "a horrific incident which shook the world's conscience" and said "no religion, faith or cause can justify such violence or inhumanity."

THE SPEECH

On behalf of the nation: 'We are sorry'

The text of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's speech at the Air India Flight 182 memorial in Toronto on Wednesday. It has been edited for length.

The destruction of Air India Flight 182 on June 23, 1985, was, and remains, the single worst act of terrorism in Canadian history. It cost the lives of 329 men, women and children.

That day the innocence, the pleasure, the anticipation – all of it was snuffed out by an act of grotesque violence and malevolence.

And you who are left, you were handed this heartbreaking loss, the burden of which it is all but impossible to calculate.

Your pain is our pain. As you grieve, so we grieve. And, as the years have deepened your grief, so has the understanding of our country grown.

Canadians who sadly did not at first accept that this outrage was made in Canada, accept it now. Let me just speak directly to this perception. For it is wrong, and it must be laid to rest. This 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 Canada.

We wish this realization had gained common acceptance earlier.

However, it is this understanding which guides the actions of our government today.

... It is why four years ago, in one of the very first acts of our new government, we appointed retired Justice John Major

to scrutinize without limit the investigation of the bombing of Air India Flight 182.

I come now to a difficult place.

Commissioner Major reported on the first phase of his inquiry in December, 2007. In it, he recorded many personal stories, some that I have heard first-hand from families of victims. I found their words deeply moving.

Six days ago, Commissioner Major issued his second report. It is, finally, a thorough examination of events, and deeply disturbing. For, although Commissioner Major's report runs to 3,000 pages, although it summarizes the testimony of hundreds of witnesses, although it shines a light on institutional processes that Commissioner Major referred to in some cases as a "dysfunctional focus on self-justification," and in others as "slow, intermittent, and acrimonious," it can still be reduced to a few words:

This should not have happened.

Commissioner Major delivered a damning indictment of many things that occurred before and after the fact. Things, ladies and gentlemen, that this Government of Canada cannot defend, has no wish to defend. And Commissioner Major finds that, to make matters worse, the families of the victims were for years after treated with scant respect or consideration by agencies of the Government of Canada.

These are things for which honour and duty require that the Government of Canada – the government that called

this inquiry – now apologize.

I stand before you, therefore, to offer on behalf of the Government of Canada, and all Canadians, an apology for the institutional failings of 25 years ago and the treatment of the victims' families thereafter.

The protection of its citizens is the first obligation of government.

The mere fact of the destruction of Air India Flight 182 is the primary evidence that something went very, very wrong.

For that, we are sorry.

For that, and also for the years during which your legitimate need for answers and indeed, for empathy, were treated with administrative disdain.

Ladies and gentlemen, Commissioner Major has made many important recommendations. We are in the course of reviewing them and have already begun the vital work of improving safety and security at our airports. It is a matter of the utmost importance to our government that such a thing never happens again.

Sadly, we have no way of knowing when, if, or how, we may once more be attacked. Or by whom.

We know only that terrorism is an enemy with a thousand faces, and a hatred that festers in the darkest spots of the human mind.

And we fear that when we invite from around the world those who share our aspirations for a better life, others also come, those who see in our Canada, not new bridges to a hopeful future, but only another chance to travel the old

roads to the blood-feuds of the past.

And let me address, as the families have asked me to do, my fellow political leaders of every stripe: It is incumbent upon us all, not to reach out to, but rather to marginalize, to carefully and systematically marginalize, those extremists who seek to import the battles of India's past here and then to export them back to that great and forward-looking nation.

We must have none of it. Just as we must continue the struggle against destroyers and murderers of all kinds.

And it will, with energy and urgency. Whatever the threat, we must anticipate it. Wherever it comes from, we must be ready for it. Whoever would lift up a perverse ideology by casting down the innocent – we must learn how to thwart them.

Let me say that again: The finest memorial we can build to your loved ones is to prevent another Flight 182.

This is our duty to you, and to all Canadians.

CORRECTIONS

Ravi Hira is a Vancouver lawyer quoted in a story about the 20th anniversary of the expiry of the Meech Lake accord. His surname was misspelled.

The Toronto Humane Society has not decided whether to re-apply for a wildlife custodian authorization. The court date for provincial charges is July 21. Incorrect information appeared in Tuesday's paper.