

COMPENSATION

No offer for relatives of Air India victims

As compensation talks begin, the Harper government points out, historically, payouts in similar situations are in the \$25,000 range

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The Harper government has opened discussions over compensation with relatives of Air India victims by telling them that payouts historically awarded in similar situations range from \$20,000 to \$25,000 per victim.

However, it made no offer during meetings Friday with relatives of those killed in the 1985 airline bombing.

Immigration Minister Jason Kenney and Public Safety Minister Vic Toews gathered with Air India victim relatives in Toronto to discuss how the government will respond to the recommendations of a public inquiry into the tragedy.

The Major Inquiry report released in June on the 25-year-old Air India bombing detailed the federal government's bungling of the ensuing investigation and urged, among other things, symbolic compensation. This amounts to ex-gratia payments that are made without admission of legal liability.

As it is, most Air India victims families received out-of-court settlement payments a few years after the bombing, based on what was known at that time about the circumstances surrounding the deaths. These payments, from insurance settlements, were never officially announced.

But government documents released under access to information law, and interviews with family members, suggest the average payment was \$75,000 (U.S.) for each person killed. Some who lost high-income family members received more.

In discussing a possible federal government payment Friday, sources say Canadian officials outlined how much Ottawa has traditionally paid out in ex-gratia payments.

These include compensation for the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, the payments for the Chinese head tax and ex-gratia payouts for the spraying of



Relatives of victims in the Air India bombing look at a monument in Vancouver. Some are upset with the pace of talks with Ottawa. DARRYL DYCK/CANADIAN PRESS

Agent Orange at Canadian Forces Base Galetown.

Two hundred and eighty Canadians died in the Air India bombing.

Promode Sabharwal, who lost his 12-year-old daughter in the Air India disaster, took the Friday discussion with ministers and officials to mean that Ottawa intends to pay out only \$25,000 to the families of each victim.

He said he did not have an amount in mind but added he was surprised and disappointed at the figure.

"It should be reasonable. \$25,000 – how far can it go and

what is the use of it? I don't know. I cannot say anything more. Whatever they are doing, they should know better."

Mr. Sabharwal suggested Ottawa consider the payments that were made to victims of terrorism in other high-profile cases, such as the 1988 Lockerbie bombing. The Libyan government paid out \$10-million to relatives of each victim.

"I do not know what they are up to, what they think," Mr. Sabharwal said of the Harper government.

"We have been waiting and waiting and waiting. They spend millions on the RCMP [investiga-

tion] – on this-and-that things."

The meeting in Toronto lasted about 90 minutes. Mr. Sabharwal listened by telephone from his home in Montreal. He said he heard views expressed by family members in Vancouver, and elsewhere. Some people said they would give the money to a charity on behalf of the government of Canada.

A source familiar with the deliberations said the discussion of previous compensation did not constitute an offer.

"There was no suggestion the government has a predetermined outcome or made a decision. Those were simply

mentioned as factual historical reference points so people understand what has happened before."

Perviz Madon, whose husband was on the flight, said the families were brought up-to-date on what the government was doing. "It was a preliminary get-together," she said in an interview.

Ms. Madon, who lives in Vancouver, phoned in to the meeting in Toronto.

She said some family members were upset with what they heard.

But Ms. Madon was not concerned. "They are not doing anything right now," she said.