

# Air India Victim's Kin Slam Canada Govt

VANCOUVER - It was the bitterest day for the relatives of the victims of the Air India Kanishka bombing in June 1985.

Poignant scenes were witnessed in the British Columbian Supreme Court after Justice Ian Bruce Josephson acquitted the two suspects — Ripduman Singh Malik and Ajaib Singh Bagri — in the case.

The shocked relatives of the victims, who were flown in here from across Canada, India and the US, cried openly and slammed the Canadian justice system for letting them down.

Huddled together, they gave vent to their anger during an interaction with the media on the court premises, calling upon the Canadian government to order a public inquiry into the case.

"I am devastated. The true perpetrators of the heinous crime are free ... the verdict has made a mockery of the Canadian system. If the prime minister and the justice minister have any integrity left, they owe us a public inquiry," said Vancouver-based Indo-Canadian Eddie Madon who lost his father in the crash and witnessed most of the trial proceedings.

Flanked by his mother and sister, he raged, "The Crown (prosecution) didn't meet the burden of proof. It was the Canadian crime, and it is sickening that this government woke up only

after 9/11." His mother said she had lived all these years hoping that one-day justice would be done. "This is another tragedy for us. No government minister has been willing to meet us— aren't we Canadians?"

Lata Pada, who lost her husband and two daughters in the bombing, described the verdict as another tragedy. "It is a travesty of justice. The verdict flies in the face of what we believe is justice.," she said.

Hitting out the Canadian deputy prime minister who has ruled out a public inquiry, Ms Pada said, "It is premature on the deputy prime minister's part to say when she has not read the 600-odd pages verdict. This government needs to be held accountable."

The government, she said, would have responded differently if the victims were the mainstream white community.

The ageing Banu Sakli, who lost her sister and her husband, broke into tears when she said, "my sister came to meet me. She and her husband were doctors, and they left behind an orphan boy. My grief will continue till the day I die."

Holding aloft the picture of his 24-year-old daughter, Rattan Singh Kalsi of Montreal said, "If this court has let us down, there is a higher court. God will punish the killers..... why was the Golden Temple attacked? Because there

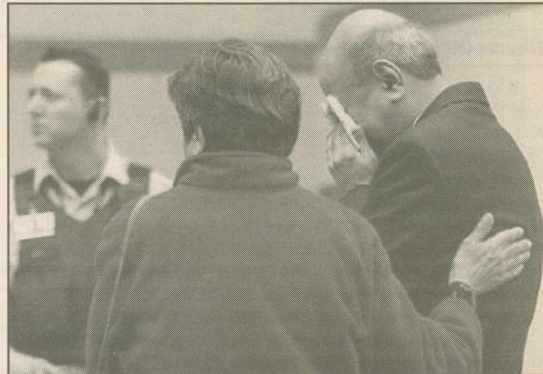
were terrorists inside...I am not afraid of anybody after today's judgment."

Sanjay Lazar, who lost his whole family in the bombing, flew in from Mumbai to hear the verdict. "I travelled all the way to see the Canadian justice system, but I have been left shattered. We were looking for justice, not retribution. It is shocking."

Sushil Gupta, leader of the victims' association, said there had been no help from the Canadian government.

"When the tragedy occurred, I was a small boy. In Ireland, no Canadian official was on the scene even though the whole world knew about the tragedy. There was no grief counselling, no assistance. It was a Canadian tragedy, but they have taken a very inappropriate view. The then prime Brian Mulroney had sent a message of condolence to his Indian counterpart Rajiv Gandhi. Why? The victims were Canadians. And it was a terrorist conspiracy conceived and executed in Canada. But the government is silent," he lamented.

Calling for a public inquiry, he said in the past the reasons given by the government for not ordering a public inquiry were the civil suit involving claims by the families. "That doesn't exist with today's verdict. Only a public inquiry can investigate the failures of the



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systems," he said.

Montreal-based Mahesh Sharma, who lost his wife, two children and mother-in-law demanded to know why the judge didn't allow cross-examination of Inderjit Singh Reyat (the third man already jailed). Only a public inquiry will clear things."

Many of them blamed the one-man jury for the verdict, saying the case should have been tried by a five or six-member jury. How can a single judge's verdict be trusted? They wondered.

Indo-Canadian MLA Dave Hayer, whose father Tara Singh Hayer was allegedly killed in 1998 before he could testify against the

accused, said the verdict sends the message that you can blow up planes in Canada and then walk away free. "This country will become a haven for terrorists, I am afraid. There is a need for special laws and special courts to deal with terrorists," he suggested.

Balwant Gill, a moderate Sikh leader, said the verdict might deepen the divisions with the Sikh community in British Columbia.

At the press conference, the investigating agency — the Royal Canadian Mounted Police — came in for scathing criticism.

However, its representative, John Ward, said the verdict didn't mean the investigation was over.