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Statement by the Prime Minister of Canada

Statement

23 June 2010

Ottawa, Ontario

Prime Minister Stephen Harper today delivered the following speech at the Commemoration Ceremony for the 25th anniversary of the Air India Flight 182 atrocity:

“Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, friends and families, thank you for being here this evening.

“A quarter century has gone by since the terrible event for which we are gathered today, namely the destruction of Air India Flight 182, which killed 329 people, most of them Canadians.

“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. They perished that day, when a bomb planted in the hold of their aircraft exploded. Meanwhile, a similar bomb intended for another Air India flight, detonated at Tokyo’s Narita airport, killing two baggage handlers.

“Around the world, it was a dreadful day.

“Let us picture it once more. Most of those on Flight 182 were our fellow citizens, Canadians going to India for business or pleasure or family reunions. Eighty-two of those aboard were children, no doubt to be received and shown off with happy pride. Activities familiar to all of us, then, a journey begun with excitement and hopeful expectations.

“But, 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, severed bonds that still ache with the burning sadness of love remembered in empty silence.

“This was evil, perpetrated by cowards, despicable, senseless and vicious. I will make no attempt to make any sense of it. Nor will I speak of roads to healing. Some wounds are too deep to be healed even by the remedy of time. What I can tell you is this.

“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.

“Canadians now understand that 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. So, we have encouraged the building of more memorials such as the original one in Ireland that I had the honour of visiting in 2005, and this one here in Toronto.

“It is why the Government of Canada made June 23rd the National Day of Remembrance for Victims of Terrorism. And 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.

“This should not have happened. And 329 people should not have perished in the sky that day in June, south of Ireland.

“It is not enough to say that the system failed. It did of course. But, this is to sanitize with words a succession of woeful inadequacies that Commissioner Major calls “a cascading series of errors.”

“No. that is not enough.

“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.

“The greatest legacy we can leave to your loved ones is to make the skies safe for travel.

“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. I want to thank the victims’ families for inviting me here today.

“Thank you very much.

“God bless you all.

“And God keep our land glorious and free.”

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