

EDITORIAL

There can be no expiration date on justice for the victims of the Air India bombing

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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The Air India Flight 182 Memorial in Toronto. The failure to arrest and punish the criminals responsible for the murders of 268 Canadians is a betrayal of the values of this country, the editorial board writes.

SAMMY KOGAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

For four decades, authorities have bungled the response to Canada's worst terrorist attack, the 1985 bombing of Air India Flight 182 that killed 329 people

on board, 268 of them Canadians.

On June 23, 1985, a bomb planted in a suitcase ripped apart Air India Flight 182 just off the coast of Ireland. Less than an hour earlier, a second bomb in a suitcase that was to be loaded onto a different Air India flight departing from Tokyo had exploded prematurely, killing two baggage handlers.

The official inquiry into the attack stated plainly in its final report in 2010: “Both bombs were planted in suitcases by the same group of Sikh terrorists.” Those terrorists wanted to retaliate against India for its 1984 raid on the Golden Temple, Sikhism’s holiest shrine.

From the first hours after the attack on Air India, politicians and police have fumbled. Then prime minister Brian Mulroney actually phoned the Indian prime minister to offer Canada’s condolences in the immediate aftermath, unable to recognize that the bombing was a Canadian tragedy.

The bungling continues, with news this week that, according to the victims’ families, the RCMP considers the investigation into the bombing “inactive” and has reduced resources.

RCMP have pulled resources from Air India bombing investigation, victims’ families say

Mr. Mulroney did recognize his error, writing personal letters of apology to the victims’ families, a rare moment of accountability in the sad 40-year history of Air India Flight 182.

The federal commission of inquiry into the Air India attack, headed by retired Supreme Court Justice John Major, documented in its final report in 2010 what would be a comedy of errors if not for the fact that it concerned the mass murder of Canadians.

There were warnings in the fall of 1984 about a Canadian-hatched plot targeting Air India flights. But officials failed to follow up on that intelligence, and turf wars impeded information sharing. The anti-terrorism effort was also

hindered because CSIS agents “were unable to distinguish one traditionally attired Sikh from another.”

Mr. Major described that and other instances of official incompetence as a “cascading series of errors” that resulted in the Air India atrocity.

Less than three weeks before the bombing, Talwinder Singh Parmar, the mastermind of the attack, and his fellow terrorists tested a bomb in the woods of British Columbia – while under surveillance. CSIS agents wrongly assumed that the detonation was the sound of rifle shot.

The cascade of errors continued after the attack, as police and Crown prosecutors failed to secure any convictions for the central crime. One man, Inderjit Singh Reyat, pleaded guilty to manslaughter for his role in helping to make the bombs, and was later also convicted of perjury.

Mr. Parmar was arrested and charged with weapons offences in late 1985, but he never stood trial. He left Canada, and was killed by Indian police in 1992. Two other men stood trial in B.C., but were acquitted in 2005. One of those men, Ripudaman Singh Malik, was killed in Surrey, B.C. in 2022.

Families of Air India victims still waiting for Ottawa to release the wreckage

The families of the Air India victims still wait for justice, even as the horror of the worst terrorist incident in Canada’s history fades from memory. A 2023 poll found that nine out of 10 respondents had scant or no awareness of the attack; three in five respondents under 35 had never heard of it. Every minister of education, every drafter of history curricula, bears responsibility for that appalling amnesia.

And now, the RCMP is folding its hands. Federal Public Safety Minister Gary Anandasangaree did say in a statement to The Globe and Mail that the RCMP considers that investigation “remains open,” adding that “should new, credible information or evidence come forward, it will be assessed and investigated and may lead to further investigative steps.” How comforting it must be to the families to know that the RCMP will not ignore evidence that might “come forward.”

The failure to arrest and punish the criminals responsible for the murders of 268 Canadians is a betrayal of the values of this country, a passive acceptance of injustice. That failure is nothing less than a quiet contempt for the victims' families.

There could be no more heartbreaking a condemnation than the words of Deepak Khandelwal, whose two siblings, Chandra and Manju, died on Air India Flight 182. Mr. Khandelwal said he is “disappointed, angry, upset. But not surprised, because they have let us down for 41 years, and this is just the next step in it.”

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