

Dentist who lost wife and daughter on Flight PS752 fights to seek justice

January 8 marked the first anniversary of the tragedy of the crash of the Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752.

176 passengers were on board the flight, in which 138 of them had ties with Canada.

Minutes after the plane took off from Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport in Iran, Flight PS752 came down in a field where all passengers on board lost their lives. The cause was first said to be due to a mechanical error, but evidence was later discovered that the plane was hit by an Iranian missile.

Area dentist Dr. Hamed Esmaeilion was one of the members who lost family on that fatal flight.

His wife, Dr. Parisa Eghbalian, also a dentist, and daughter Reera Esmaeilion were two of the 176 victims.

Dr. Esmaeilion, who has been working in the dentistry industry for the past 17 years, has practiced in Aurora, Caledon and Richmond Hill since moving to Canada in 2010. His wife and daughter were visiting family in Iran over the holidays and were returning home where they were transferred to a connecting flight ? Flight PS752.

?This whole year has been like a nightmare for me,? he said.

In the beginning, Iranian officials declared no participation in the events. As investigations were pursued and evidence collected, Iran admitted to their involvement.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau later assigned Ralph Goodale in March as his special advisor in order to ?examine lessons learned from the crash of Flight PS752 and other air disasters, develop a framework to guide Canada's response to international air disasters, provide recommendations on best practices, including advice on tools and mechanisms needed to prevent future events.?

Mr. Goodale released a report this past December which strongly underscored the importance of taking care of the families who've lost loved ones.

?Each encounter is profoundly emotional because the families' grief and anguish are so real and ongoing,? he stated. ?They tell their personal stories. They describe their loved ones, now gone. They mourn the rich human potential so cruelly destroyed. They ask questions. They yearn for the truth.?

Families from Iran, Afghanistan, Sweden, Ukraine and the United Kingdom also lost loved ones.

After the loss of his two family members, Dr. Esmaeilion went back to work but found he couldn't continue full-time. In order to work and fight towards getting the truth behind the tragedy, he, along with other family members of the victims of Flight PS742, organized an association in order to inform the public of recent news and to seek justice.

?I lost two people,? said Dr. Esmaeilion. ?We passed one year. One year is nothing compared to the life span of a human being. I couldn't do anything else, I needed to know what happened to my wife and my daughter.?

PS752 Justice is a non-profit organization developed by the group of families of the victims of Flight PS752, for which Dr. Esmaeilion is the spokesperson.

Their mission, according to their website is ?to unite the grieving families, keep the memories of the passengers alive, and most importantly seek justice. We are determined to uncover the truth and find out why a commercial flight was shot down by IRGC's (Islamic Revolution Guard Corps) missiles. We will staunchly seek justice until the culprits, perpetrators and commanders of this

atrocious crime are identified and brought to justice before an impartial and independent court.?

?The story behind it is very complicated. It's very hard to understand the chain of events that ended up murdering 176 people,? said Dr. Esmailion. ?It's a constant fight. Before all this we were ordinary people living in Canada, living in Richmond Hill. Then in three minutes, life changes. You have to tell yourself why, why this happened to me and it's very difficult to answer. But you have two options: just sit at home and cry for the rest of your life or stand up and fight. So, [the] majority of the families chose the second one.?

The downing of the Flight PS752, came about during high tensions between Iran and the United States. Just five days beforehand, the U.S launched a drone that killed Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani. The same day as the downing of Flight PS752, Iran launched missiles at the U.S military bases in Iraq.

A timeline of events is provided on the PS752 Justice website along with other updates, news, and actions being held in order to seek the truth, as well as justice.

?Justice for us, and closure for us is to see the criminals in an international court,? said Dr. Esmailion. ?There's a long way to go. We are fighting with the government of Iran, but here we have to encourage and push our government forward. They have been very supportive, but after a year, there's no truth. There's no justice yet.?

A major virtual memorial event was held to honour the victims of Flight PS752 on January 7 and January 8. The event was live streamed on the association's YouTube channel, beginning at the same time the fateful flight took off one year ago.

The event included videos and photos provided from the families of the victims and biographies were read out. A short movie of the children who lost their lives was aired, as well as a social distanced rally took place in Toronto where family members of the victims walked together from University of Toronto's front campus and concluded at City Hall.

Government officials also shared their words on the anniversary, including Premier Doug Ford who stated, ?All Ontarians grieve with you. Our government continues to support our federal counterparts working with the international community to pursue accountability, reparations and justice.?

Said Dr. Esmailion: ?Everybody sees themselves in that flight. That's why it's not difficult to keep the memory alive among the Iranian Canadian community.?

As the majority of the news since March of last year has revolved around the COVID-19 pandemic, PS752 Justice wasn't able to clearly state their mission, but as the anniversary came around, they were able to speak to a wider audience.

They fear they will be put into the dark once again but will continue to work together as a unit to inform and educate the public and seek justice.

?My whole life is dedicated to PS752 Justice,? said Dr. Esmailion.

A fundraiser is also continuously ongoing to help PS752 Justice continue to conduct their work. They have organized a Go Fund Me page which has reached over \$160,000. The fundraiser can be found at gofundme.com under ?Help Us to Keep Up the Fight for Justice'.

To learn more about PS752 Justice please visit ps752justice.com or on their social media platforms.

By Alyssa Parkhill