

Air India Crash: UK Families Sent Wrong Remains, Lawyer Claims

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An Air India Boeing 787 Dreamliner plummeted into a residential area in Ahmedabad, India, shortly after departing from Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel International Airport. The catastrophic crash claimed the lives of 241 of the 242 passengers and crew aboard, alongside 19 people on the ground, marking it the deadliest aviation disaster in a decade. Now, a British lawyer representing some of the victims' families has raised serious concerns about the handling of the deceased, alleging that the wrong remains were sent to certain UK families.

James Healy-Pratt, an international aviation lawyer, told PA Media that at least two UK nationals' remains were misidentified upon repatriation. In one particularly distressing case, a London coroner, Dr Fiona Shaw, uncovered DNA anomalies in a casket, revealing that the remains of multiple individuals had been co-mingled. "Dr Shaw's diligence in checking the identification of the incoming remains revealed that one loved one was not who the family believed," Healy-Pratt explained. This discovery has deepened the anguish of families already grappling with immense loss.

The crash occurred when the aircraft, bound for London, lost control moments after take-off and crashed into the BJ Medical College and Hospital hostel. A preliminary report by India's Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau points to a critical error: the fuel control switches in the cockpit were inexplicably turned off, starving the engines of power. An audio recording from the black box captures one pilot questioning the other about the switches, with the second pilot denying responsibility. Although the switches were flipped back on, and one engine showed signs of recovery, the plane's descent was unstoppable.

Among the 241 fatalities were 169 Indian nationals, seven Portuguese, one Canadian, and 53 UK passengers. The sole survivor, Vishwash Kumar Ramesh, a UK passenger, described to local media how he clung to a small space near the door and escaped the wreckage.

The families of three victims, Akeel Nanabawa, his wife Hannaa Vorajee, and their four-year-old daughter Sara Nanabawa, issued a statement expressing their distress over the mishandling of remains. "Recent developments confirm fears that serious mistakes were made, undermining the dignity and rights of victims and their families," they said. While confident they received the correct remains, they voiced concern for others still seeking closure, adding, "This isn't just a personal tragedy; it is a collective one."

India's foreign ministry responded, with spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal asserting on X that victim identification followed "established protocols" and that the remains were handled with "utmost professionalism." He added that India is working closely with UK authorities to address concerns. However, these assurances have done little to quell the families' frustrations, particularly as the tragedy coincides with high-level talks between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the UK's Labour Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, during which a free trade agreement was signed. Healy-Pratt, who is pushing for "financial justice" for the families, believes the issue of misidentified remains will feature prominently in these discussions.

The mishandling of remains has cast a shadow over an already devastating event, raising questions about the competence of the current Labour government's coordination with international partners on such sensitive matters. For the families, the pain of loss is now compounded by uncertainty, as they demand accountability and respect for their loved ones' memories.