

India 'rushing to blame the pilots' say families of air crash victims

Angry relatives refuse to believe official report and vow to take airline to court over disaster that killed 261

By Samaan Lateef in Mumbai

THE families of the Air India crash victims have expressed scepticism over the initial investigation report, accusing authorities of rushing to blame the pilots for the disaster.

The highly anticipated document, which was released by Indian authorities just after midnight on Friday night, said initial findings indicate that switches controlling fuel flow to the jet's two engines were turned off, leading to a catastrophic loss of thrust at take-off.

According to the report, one of the pilots is heard asking the other why "did you cut off" the fuel supply in the recovered cockpit voice recording. The other pilot responded that he "didn't".

Air India Flight 171, bound for London Gatwick, crashed shortly after taking off from Ahmedabad airport on June 12, killing 230 passengers and 12 crew members.

A further 19 people were killed on the ground. Vishwash Kumar Ramesh, a 40-year-old British national, was the sole survivor among those on board.

"This report is wrong. We don't



Sumeet Sabharwal and Clive Kunder were flying the plane and sent a mayday alert

accept it," said Ameen Siddiqui, 28, whose brother-in-law Akeel Nanabawa died alongside his wife, Hannaa Vorajee, and their daughter, Sara, four.

Akeel, who grew up in Newport, South Wales, was returning to his home in Gloucestershire with his wife and child. "It's a cover-up," Mr Siddiqui told *The Telegraph* from Surat, south of Ahmedabad.

"They want to blame dead pilots who can't defend themselves. How can the fuel switches end up turning off at a critical moment, either through pilot error or a mechanical fault?"

"And if these pilots were so careless, why did the government allow them to fly at all? Air India until recently was owned by the government."

Mr Siddiqui added: "We have rejected Air India's compensation. We will take them to court. They have to answer our questions and take responsibility."

"We have seen the videos of the passengers and pilots before the take off. Everyone was happy in the plane including the pilots."

"You could not find a tinge of sadness, fear or anger on anyone's face. Why will they [pilots] turn the fuel switches off deliberately. Everyone was smiling."

However, the report was described as "the first stepping stone" by Akeel's relatives.

In a statement, they said: "Moving forwards, we require honesty, transparency, and an unwavering commitment to uncovering the full truth. We seek justice and answers, both of which are essential for us to find any sense of closure."

"We accept God's fate, but knowing what happened will help ease our hearts and allow us to begin the long journey of healing."

Others felt differently. "I wanted answers so I could begin to heal. Instead, all I got was aviation jargon praising Boeing's systems," said Imtiyaz Ali Syed, 42, whose brother Javed Syed, 37, a hotel manager from west London, died with his wife Mariam and their children Zayn, six, and Amani, four.

The family, who lived in west London, had been in India on a long-awaited Eid holiday to spend time with Javed's ailing mother. Javed was a hotel manager, Mariam worked as a brand ambassador at Harrods.

"The report is saying nothing conclusive. I have read it a dozen times, but found no closure," Ali said.

He demanded the full cockpit audio be released in the presence of independent and international experts. "We have lost our entire families," he said. "How can we move on without the truth?"

Investigation Key findings of Air India report

1. Dual engine shutdown

Both engines flamed out just seconds after take-off when fuel cut-off switches were inexplicably moved from 'run' to 'cutoff'.

2. Cockpit exchange

Voice recordings captured one pilot urgently asking, 'Why did you cut off?' - met with a stunned reply, 'I didn't.'

3. Power failure on CCTV

The emergency Ram Air Turbine (RAT) deployed, a tell-tale sign of complete electrical loss, moments before impact.

4. Desperate restart bid

Crews tried to relight the engines. Engine one flickered back to life briefly, but the second engine failed to recover.

5. Plunged in 32 seconds

The aircraft remained airborne for barely half a minute.

6. Puzzling thrust lever mismatch

Thrust levers were found idle post-crash, yet black box data showed take-off power still commanded, pointing to a disconnect.

7. Fuel ruled out

Tests confirmed

clean fuel, eliminating contamination or refuelling errors.

8. Normal take-off set-up

Flaps and landing gear were correctly configured.

9. Clear skies, pilot experience

No adverse weather, bird strikes or pilot health issues.

10. No foul play detected yet

No sabotage evident, but Air India had skipped inspections.

11. Aircraft loaded safely

Within weight and balance limits, carrying no hazardous cargo.