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New Zealand

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'The time has come': Ardern apc for New Zealand's worst air disaster

PM sorry for state-owned Air New Zealand's efforts to blame pilots for 1979 crash into Antarctica's Mt Erebus

Eleanor Ainge Roy
in Dunedin
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GMT



Archive image of a rescue worker at the crash site of the Air New Zealand plane that hit Mount Erebus in Antarctica in 1979, killing all 257 on board. Photograph: AP

The prime minister, **Jacinda Ardern**, has met the relatives of those killed in the Erebus disaster - New Zealand's worst plane crash which claimed 257 lives - and offered the first apology by any government.

It is 40 years since a plane belonging to national carrier **Air New Zealand** crashed into Mount Erebus, a volcano, on a scenic tour of Antarctica. The crash was the worst in the country's aviation history and on Thursday the Ardern said Erebus remained an unparalleled tragedy in Kiwi minds.

"In 1979 so much was lost; and the ramifications were immense. And time hasn't necessarily diminished any of that," Ardern said. "That loss, in and of itself, was huge. It sent ripples across the country, and trauma that those who weren't directly affected would probably struggle to fathom."

"But that loss and grief was compounded. It was undeniably worsened by the events that followed," she said, referring to the subsequent investigation.

Years of inconclusive and murky inquiries led to accusations from grieving families that Air New Zealand was attempting a cover-up by blaming pilot error - a theory a 1981 royal commission of inquiry debunked, saying the

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crash was down to a whiteout and the plane's navigational route being changed without the pilots being informed.

Aviation experts say improved technology, such as better satellite equipment and weather data means a similar disaster would not occur today.

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The crash remains New Zealand's worst peacetime disaster, and because of the country's size - just 3 million at the time - a large portion of the population was affected, with current transport minister Phil Twyford describing it as an event "that changed our nation" forever.

At this moment on this day 40 years ago Air New Zealand Flight TE901 crashed into Mt Erebus killing all 257 passengers and crew – Aotearoa New Zealand's worst civil disaster in history. Ka maumahara. We remember. #MtErebus40 #OTD #history pic.twitter.com/qxyTbJr9N

– Dr Stephen Clarke (@StephenClarkeNZ) November 27, 2019

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The head of the royal inquiry at the time, judge Peter Mahon, described the airline's participation in the inquiry as "an orchestrated litany of lies" leaving victims' families not only grieving, but angry.

Ardern apologised wholeheartedly on behalf of the airline on Thursday, which was then wholly state-owned.

"After 40 years, on behalf of today's government, the time has come to apologise for the actions of an airline then in full state ownership; which ultimately caused the loss of the aircraft and the loss of those you loved," Ardern said. "This apology is whole-hearted and wide-reaching. We will never know your grief, but I know the time has come to say I am sorry."

The Air New Zealand chair, Dame Therese Walsh, also offered her apologies to the families, a few hundred of whom had gathered at the Auckland memorial event.

"I apologise on behalf of an airline which 40 years ago failed in its duty of care to its passengers and staff," Walsh said. "And I apologise again on behalf of the airline for the way in which the families of those lost on Mount Erebus were treated in the aftermath of the accident. Better care should have been taken of you."

Forty years on there remains no memorial to the Erebus disaster, and plans to erect one in the Auckland suburb of Parnell face strident opposition, with some saying it would be too "sad" for local residents.

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