

Indian family that froze to death at Canada-U.S. border identified



The Patel family that was found frozen to death near the Canada-US border [Courtesy of RCMP/Handout via Reuters]

Ottawa, January 30 (RHC)-- Officials in Canada say they have confirmed the identities of four Indian nationals whose frozen bodies were found in Manitoba near the Canada-United States border last week.

The High Commission of India in Ottawa released a statement saying the four who died were Jagdish Baldevbhai Patel, a 39-year-old man, Vaishaliben Jagdishkumar Patel, a 37-year-old woman, Vihangi Jagdishkumar Patel, an 11-year-old girl, and Dharmik Jagdishkumar Patel, a three-year-old boy.

The family's immediate relatives have been informed, the High Commission said in its statement, highlighting the need "to ensure that migration and mobility are made safe and legal and that such tragedies do not recur."

Investigators say the family of four had attempted to cross over the border by foot on January 19 during severe winter weather and died from exposure. Officials said they got separated from the group of 18 people and were probably caught in a blizzard, resulting in a tragedy Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau described as "mind-blowing".

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) said they believe the family arrived in Canada on January 12, first reaching Toronto, and then travelled to Emerson, Manitoba, around January 18. No vehicle was abandoned near the border, suggesting someone dropped them off and left, said Rob Hill, a criminal operations officer.

A special team, led by a senior consular officer from the Consulate General of India, is in Manitoba to help with investigations on the Canadian side and to offer services for the victims. The RCMP in Manitoba said they found the four bodies near Emerson after the U.S. border patrol agents advised them they had picked up a group of Indian nationals on the U.S. side.

One of the individuals, Steve Shand of Deltona, Florida, was found with a backpack full of items for an infant. He told investigators he was carrying the backpack for a group that got separated from them. Investigators have said they believe the deaths are linked to a human trafficking scheme.

Shand faces counts of transporting or attempting to "transport illegal aliens". He was released on conditional bail on Monday.

Meanwhile, six people running a travel and tourism company in the western state of Gujarat have been arrested in connection with the deaths, said police official AK Jhala in the state capital, Gandhinagar. "We are now trying to nab the human traffickers who managed to send this family and others abroad via illegal channels," he added.

Ashish Bhatia, director general of police in Gujarat, said investigators are trying to determine whether there was a travel agent in India who helped the group.

"The nexus of human trafficking runs deep, often involving local politicians too," said police official Jhala, adding that people even sell their land and homes to fund their migration to the US or Canada.

Canada is a sought-after destination by Indians facing massive unemployment at home. However, crossings into the U.S. from Canada are relatively rare: the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) apprehensions of migrants trying to cross between ports of entry along the US-Canada border dropped from 6,806 in 2009 to 916 in 2021.

CBP apprehended 339 Indians trying to cross into the United States at the northern border in 2019, 129 in 2020 and 41 last year. By contrast, the RCMP apprehended 16,503 asylum seekers crossing north between border crossings in 2019.

The seven Indian migrants U.S. authorities apprehended last week may be eligible for visas if they cooperate in Shand's prosecution, said Veena Iyer, executive director of the Immigration Law Center of Minnesota.



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