

Air NZ to apologise to Erebus families

By ROELAND van den BERGH - The Dominion Post Last updated 05:00 15/10/2009

Air New Zealand will say sorry to the families of those killed in the Erebus disaster as part of the 30th anniversary commemorations.

The apology will be the first to families of the 257 people who died when the airline's DC-10 crashed into Mt Erebus in Antarctica on November 28, 1979, during a sightseeing flight.

It is understood chief executive Rob Fyfe will use the unveiling of a sculpture at the airline's head office in Auckland next Friday to apologise for the way the families were treated after the accident.

But he would not go as far as apologising for the accident itself or the subsequent controversial investigations.

Air New Zealand would not reveal what would be said, referring instead to a statement earlier this week that Mr Fyfe would "speak directly about the lessons learned from the Erebus tragedy and the way in which the airline interacted with the families in the aftermath of the accident".

Jackie Nankervis, who was 15 when she lost her father and uncle in the accident, said an apology would be "a step in the right direction".

Although financial compensation was paid, most families felt there had been a lack of communication and emotional support, Ms Nankervis said. She had felt neglected by the airline for the past three decades.

These days, disaster victims received support, including counselling and constant communication. In 1979, there was nothing in place to meet the families' needs.

Air New Zealand's only direct contact with her family immediately after the accident was a bunch of flowers to her mother. "The police did everything else."

Mr Fyfe has been widely commended for his handling of the Airbus A320 crash off the French Mediterranean coast on November 28 last year, when all seven on board died - four Air New Zealand staff, a Civil Aviation Authority inspector and two German pilots. French investigators have indicated another report on the Perpignan crash could be made public before Christmas.

In a recent letter to the Erebus families, Mr Fyfe said: "It was the experience of that accident ... that caused me to reflect on many of the gaps and failings that occurred in the days, months and years after November 28, 1979."

He said the most important immediate response to Perpignan was to support the families of the victims and learn from the flight safety lessons. Laying blame was not helpful.

Ms Nankervis said she would like the airline to bring the Erebus families together - which has never happened - to allow them to share their experiences.

"I would love to meet other people who have been through the same hell as our family. When you actually start to talk about it you start to feel better."

DLA Phillips Fox litigation lawyer Craig Stevens said an apology would not have any impact on any potential legal claims against the airline.

No relatives of the crash victims have filed a claim against the airline.