FIRE, FRAGMENTATION, AND COMMINGLING: PERSONAL EFFECTS RECOVERY, TRANSFER, AND PROCESSING FOLLOWING THE AI171 URBAN AVIATION DISASTER IN AHMEDABAD

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Abstract - On 12 June 2025, Air India Flight AI171, a Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner carrying 242 passengers and crew, crashed into a densely populated residential area of Ahmedabad, India, shortly after take-off, resulting in a post-crash fire, structural collapse, and 260 fatalities, including passengers, crew, and ground casualties. This paper presents a field-based operational account from the appointed Personal Effects (PE) Director deployed through Kenyon International Emergency Services, documenting the forensic management of personal effects throughout the response.

The paper examines three interconnected phases of the operation: recovery, transfer, and warehouse processing. Personal effects were systematically recovered from a hazardous urban crash environment using a grid-based approach with strict documentation and chain-of-custody procedures. Recovery operations necessitated direct coordination with forensic teams due to the presence of thermally altered human tissue, fragmented skeletal remains, and fire-damaged debris. Recovered items were transferred under controlled conditions to a dedicated warehouse facility, where structured intake procedures ensured traceability and accountability. The final phase involved decontamination, inventorying, cataloguing, secure storage, and coordination with family assistance teams to facilitate the return of personal belongings.

Drawing on direct operational experience, this paper identifies practical challenges associated with personal effects management during urban aviation disasters involving post-crash fire and structural collapse. It proposes operational recommendations for strengthening recovery, transfer, warehouse management, and multidisciplinary coordination during future aviation-related mass fatality incidents, contributing to improved forensic practice and humanitarian response.

Keywords: Aviation disaster; Disaster Victim Identification (DVI); Personal effects recovery; Personal effects processing; Post-crash fire; Chain of custody; Warehouse management; Forensic operations; Mass fatality incident; Multi-agency coordination.