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March 19, 2020

March 19, 2020, at precisely 9:51 pm marks the official moment of Nowruz (Persian: نوروز, pronounced [now'ru:z]; lit. "new day")! Nowruz is the first day of the Iranian calendar and the first day of spring in the Northern Hemisphere. The United Nations officially recognized the "International Day of Nowruz" in 2010. Nowruz is celebrated by millions of people of different ethnicity from the Black Sea basin, to the Balkans, the Caucasus, Western Asia, central and southern Asia, including Persian, Afghan, Kurdish, Azari, Zoroastrian, Bahá'í, and Ismaili communities) worldwide.

Growing wheatgrass, major spring cleaning of your house and your belongings (خانه تکانی, Romanised: xāne tekāni), buying new clothes to wear for the New Year, and purchasing flowers are the most popular traditional preparations for Nowruz. During the Nowruz holiday, people are expected to make a short visit to the homes of family, friends and neighbours. Typically, young people will visit their elders first, and the elders return their visit later. However, it is a tradition that people first make a visit to those who lost a family member or were faced with a tragic situation in the past year.

Here in Edmonton, members of our community visited Amir Hossein's family, victim's of flight PS752, and decorated a small Haft-Sin (denoting 'seven items beginning with the letter sin (S),' each item represents the symbolic meaning of health, prosperity, wealth, friendship. etc.) at their new home.

It was 72 days ago that the news about Flight PS752 shocked the whole world. Here in Edmonton, we lost 13 beautiful souls who were the passengers of PS752. On January 8th, 2020, Ukrainian International flight PS752, a scheduled passenger flight from Tehran to Kiev, was shot down by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) with two missiles only six minutes after taking off from Imam Khomeini International Airport. In the face of this unexpected and heartbreaking tragic crime, many members of our community gathered and spent countless hours in preparation and organizing memorial ceremonies, communicating and providing support for the victims' families, as well as advocating for justice and accountability.

We can say with confidence that what we have seen in the last few weeks was the perfect image of the power of being united for a valuable purpose. We have no words to describe the magnitude of kindness and solidarity among our community and the response from all Edmontonians, the University of Alberta as well as all government officials at different levels. We want to take a moment here and express our gratitude first of all to our community members, IHSE members, and all volunteers who helped us in any form to ensure these magnificent souls will never get forgotten; without their effort, it would be impossible.

Thank you to the University of Alberta, engineering departments and president Dr. David H. Turpin and his office for their leadership role in organizing the memorial ceremony on January 12th and establishing a scholarship in memory of professors Mojgan Daneshmand and Pedram Mousavi; U of A students and alumni Pouneh Gorji, Elnaz Nabiyyi, Arash Pourzarabi, Nasim Rahmanifar, Saba

Saadat, Sara Saadat, Amir Saeedinia, Mohammad Mahdi Elyasi, and all who perished. There were also two remarkable young kids on the plane from Edmonton: 14 year old Darya Mousavi, and 9 year old Dorina Mousavi as well as Dr. Shekoufeh Choupannejad, an obstetrician-gynecologist at the Northgate Centre Medical Clinic in Edmonton.

We are grateful to the City of Edmonton, Protocol Office and Mayor Don Iveson for their material and emotional support in organizing the memorial ceremony on February 22nd and delivering a condolence book to IHSE on behalf of Edmontonians at city hall. We are grateful for the opportunities we've had to forge strong relationships and partnerships with the City of Edmonton over the last few years, and particularly in the previous two months.

Also, many thanks to Premier of Alberta Mr. Jason Kenny, his office and Leela Aheer, Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women for their meaningful and continuous support, their efforts to remain in close contact with the affected families as well as recognizing Nowruz at the Legislative Assembly of Alberta.

Furthermore, we are thankful to the office of the Federal Government Mr. Salem Alahmad, Regional Affairs in Edmonton, Office of Deputy Prime Minister Ms. Chrystia Freeland, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Immigration and Citizenship, and particularly Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for their compassion and assurance of support to affected families, including facilitating Visas. We commend all government officials for their commitment to the safety of all Canadians and their focus on the pursuit of justice and accountability in the face of this national tragedy.

The Iranian Heritage Society of Edmonton announced the cancelling of all its gathering on March 6th to all the members due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Despite the countless hours that our volunteers spent on preparation for International Women's Day, Celebration of fire (Cha-har-shan-beh-souri), Nowruz Bazaar, and the Nowruz Gala, as community leaders we felt it is our responsibility to protect our guests and communities. It's been our goal to bring the community together, promote and preserve Iranian culture, and spread joy and happiness.

Our nation has been facing historic and difficult challenges since the beginning of 2020, so let us remind each other we are a country of shared values of openness, respect, compassion, willingness to work hard, to be there for each other, and to search for equality and justice. Those qualities are what make us the first post-national state. March 20th is the first day of spring in Canada. The Iranian Heritage Society of Edmonton and the Iranian-Canadian community is committed to their social role in advocating programs to stop the spread of COVID-19.

There is a common phrase in Farsi that we say during Nowruz when we meet our guests, which is "Nowruz Pirouz," meaning may it be a victorious new year. Together we can still change the course of this pandemic - but that needs to be presented in action. Together we can demand accountability and justice against those who perished: 177 human lives, in which 139 of them were living with Canadian values. Together we are strong, our fellow Canadians, so from all of us: "Nowruz Pirouz."

Sincerely,

On Behalf of Board of Directors of Iranian Heritage Society of Edmonton

Reza Akbari