# Shattered sense of safety

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“It was like a war zone,” an eyewitness said of the horrifying spectacle of bodies lying on the street after a black SUV plowed through the Filipino community’s crowded Lapu-Lapu Day festivities in Vancouver, Canada, Saturday night.

The street party was winding down after having drawn up to 100,000 revelers with its offer of food, cultural numbers, and music from popular artists of Filipino descent, including rap star Apl.de. Ap. The crew was dismantling the barricades around the area when a car drove “full speed,” mowing down the throng of people and food stalls lining the street.

“It was like seeing a bowling ball hit — all the pins flying up in the air,” one witness recalled of the bodies flying amid screams and ensuing panic. “Heartbreaking beyond words,” was how a Filipino priest in the nearby parish described the carnage.

At least 11 people, aged 5 to 65, were killed while more than 30 were injured in the event celebrating Filipino culture, and the indigenous hero known for resisting Spanish colonization in the 16th century. Police have ruled out terrorism and arrested Kai-Ji Adam Lo, the 30-year-old SUV driver said to have serious mental health problems.

“This is something that happens in the (United) States, not here,” a reporter said of Canada’s reputation as one of the safest countries in the world. In fact, the North American travel insurance company Berkshire Hathaway Travel Protection, listed Canada third in its 2025 annual safety rankings, just behind Iceland and Australia.

## Surprising aberration

That’s reason enough for Filipinos to flock to its shores, numbering almost a million in 2021, according to Statistics Canada. In British Columbia alone — which includes Vancouver — over 174,000 Filipinos represent 3.5 percent of the province’s total population, placing third among Asian residents after South Asia and China.

Which makes the car-ramming attack a surprising aberration, according to Vancouver police who defended their safety protocols for the festival, saying there were no indications of threats beforehand.

“Last year … there was zero interactions with police at this festival,” police chief Steve Rai told reporters. “It was a family-friendly cultural celebration involving kids, and we wanted to maintain that based on that information and threat assessment.” Rai said. “We don’t want to cage everybody up at every event in Vancouver,” he added.

But while the light police presence may be explained away, it’s deplorable that the police’s and health professionals’ negligence and lack of oversight have let loose an individual who poses a tangible threat to the public.

## Mea culpas

The suspect is said to have had previous encounters with police and mental health workers because of episodes with his mental health, the latest being only the day before the Lapu Lapu Day block party. Even his family had expressed concern about it and should have alerted police and health workers to keep a discreet eye on him, maybe even have him under observation in a mental health facility.

Canada, after all, is known for its extensive and accessible health-care system, another plus in its attraction for would-be migrants.

Rai has acknowledged that more should be done to address the root causes of mental health disorders, and said the police will now be working with the city “to review all the circumstances surrounding the planning of this event.”

He added: “The system had worked up to this point — but this will be a watershed moment for city operations, police, ambulance, and all stakeholders.”

Such mea culpas are welcome, as are the expressions of support for the Filipino community from government officials and institutions, which offer needed comfort for grieving families, and counselling for those affected by the tragedy to start what could be a long healing process.

## Reasonable response

President Marcos said the tragedy was “totally unexplainable” and that it “could not even be categorized as a terrorist concern.” That does not, in any way, lessen the gravity of the crime.

It’s important to ensure that justice is done, given that the suspect’s legal team is expected to bring up severe mental health issues as a mitigating circumstance in the charges of multiple counts of murder that he is facing. Prosecution to the fullest extent of the law is the only reasonable response for this massacre.

How we react to the Vancouver incident is as crucial, said Fil-Canadian community leader Mabel Elmore, who noted that this “is not just a Filipino community issue, but an issue about all of us, our sense of safety, our trust in government institutions, our faith that we would look out for each other.”

These are words to live by, as thousands of miles away back home, Filipinos are similarly reeling from the string of killings linked to the May 12 elections. May accountability for the guilty and swift justice for the bereaved hold together our fragile sense of safety in these turbulent times!