

Search continues for Malaysia Airlines plane

By Alan Leigh
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No wreckage of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370, a Boeing 777 that vanished on March 8 with 12 crew and 227 passengers on board, has been recovered from the areas of the Indian Ocean where a range of satellite imagery identified possible debris of an aircraft.

Images have been released by British, Australian, US, Chinese, French, Japanese and Thai sources. Images published by Airbus Defense and Space based in France showed 122 potential objects, varying from one metre to 23 metres in length, in a 400-square-kilometre area of ocean.

Images taken on March 24 and released yesterday by Thailand's Geo-Informatics Space Technology Development Agency, showed over 300 objects, from one metre to 15 metres in size, some 2,700 kilometres southwest of Perth, Australia. Further images taken by Japan on Wednesday identified at least 10 objects, with the largest one about four metres by eight metres.

According to experts, images with much greater clarity would be available from military surveillance satellites with high-resolution cameras. However, governments in the region and internationally are unwilling to reveal their military and intelligence capabilities.

Eleven military and civilian aircraft were expected to deploy today and over the weekend to attempt to carry out close surveillance of what may be wreckage. Five ships were in the area. According to the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA), which is coordinating the search, limited visibility caused by cloud and rain and remoteness of the area has made the operation extremely difficult.

Today, AMSA said the search would shift closer to the West Australian coast based on further analysis of data captured before radar contact was lost. "It indicated that the aircraft was travelling faster than previously estimated, resulting in increased fuel usage and reducing the possible distance the aircraft travelled

south into the Indian Ocean," AMSA said.

Ten aircraft and six vessels were sent to the new search location, which is 1,100 kilometres northeast of the previous search zone. The new zone is just over 1,800 kilometres west of Perth. The Australian Geospatial-Intelligence Organisation, a military agency, is re-tasking satellites to image the new area.

Nearly three weeks on, it remains unclear what exactly happened to cause Flight MH370 to change from its original flight path from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. Controversy and speculation is still raging throughout the international media, with theories ranging from pilot suicide to a hijacking. Other analysts suggest that the crew tried to make an emergency landing but became debilitated, leaving the plane flying on automatic pilot until it ran out of fuel.

A finding of pilot suicide would certainly be in the interests of both the airline and Boeing. A report published on Wednesday by CNN highlighted Malaysia Airlines' serious financial difficulties. It lost over \$US1.3 billion during the past three years, along with a third of its stock value. Timothy Ross, head research analyst for Asia Pacific transport at Credit Suisse, blamed mismanagement and the "unionised workforce" for the airline's crisis. Under pressure to slash costs, the management imposed cuts to the airline's maintenance budget.

Last year, the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) warned of a potentially serious technical flaw in Boeing 777s. The FAA issued a worldwide alert over the dangers of cracking in the fuselage skin, underneath the aircraft's satellite antenna, that could potentially lead to decompression and render the occupants, including the crew, unconscious.

In the US, a legal petition for "discovery" has been filed against Boeing and Malaysia Airlines by Ribbeck Law Chartered in a Cook County, Illinois, circuit court. Monica Kelly, head of Global Aviation Litigation at

Ribbeck Law Chartered, told Reuters: “Our theory of the case is that there was a failure of the equipment in the cockpit that may have caused a fire that rendered the crew unconscious, or perhaps because of the defects in the fuselage which had been reported before, there was some loss in the cabin pressure that also made the pilot and copilot unconscious... That plane was actually a ghost plane for several hours until it ran out of fuel.”

The anger among the families of the missing has grown since the Malaysian government, based on briefings from British sources, announced on Tuesday that the flight had crashed in the Indian Ocean, killing all aboard. Sara Weeks, the sister-in-law of Paul Weeks, a New Zealand citizen on the flight, commented: “The whole situation has been handled appallingly, incredibly insensitively.”

Chinese relatives, frustrated by the unclarity about the search and lack of verified information, marched to the Malaysian embassy following the announcement and denounced the Malaysian authorities as “liars.”

The Malaysian government and Malaysia Airlines have been accused of secrecy and withholding information. The *Strait Times* reported that at a briefing on Wednesday in Beijing, Malaysian government and airline representatives told families that some evidence was “sealed.” The sealed evidence “included air traffic control radio transcript, radar data and airport security recordings.”

Initially, Malaysian authorities claimed that the plane disappeared about an hour after it took off from Kuala Lumpur and had not been subsequently detected. They then revealed that military radar had in fact tracked the aircraft flying into the Straits of Malacca after civilian authorities lost contact.

Malaysian Deputy Defence Minister Abdul Rahim Bakri claimed that no action was taken at that point because the military “assumed” that the “non-hostile plane” had been ordered to turn back. Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein refused to confirm or deny at a press conference whether military radar operators knew for certain that the plane had been told to change its flight path by air traffic controllers.

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