

Search continues for missing AirAsia flight

By Will Morrow
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Forty-eight hours after AirAsia Flight QZ8501 disappeared over the Java Sea, search efforts are ongoing and have still found no confirmed trace of the missing plane. On board the flight were seven crew members and 155 passengers, including 15 children and one infant.

Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla last night said that 15 ships and 30 aircraft would be involved in the second day of searching today, which will cover an expanded region of 156,000 square kilometres. “It is not an easy operation in the sea, especially in bad weather like this,” he said.

The US government has dispatched the USS Sampson, a guided-missile destroyer based in San Diego, to join the search efforts. The Chinese government has also announced it was sending a navy frigate and aircraft. The search currently involves aircraft and ships from Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia, as well as an Australian patrol plane.

The area of the Java Sea where the AirAsia flight was last in contact, some 20 miles east of the Indonesian island of Belitung, is adjacent to key international shipping lanes through the Sunda and Malacca Straits. Due to its key geo-strategic significance, it is continuously monitored by military satellites operated by a number of countries.

Reports of debris and oil slicks have been investigated and deemed unrelated to the missing aircraft. Search teams are currently following up reports of smoke on Long Island. But Henry Bambang Soelistyo, the head of the Indonesian National Search and Rescue Agency, said yesterday he suspected the plane was “at the bottom of the sea,” based on its last known coordinates.

While there has been no explanation for what caused the plane to vanish, aviation experts have pointed to several possible scenarios involving the severe weather conditions.

Much of South East Asia is currently being hit by torrential rain and monsoonal storms, which has led to flooding in eastern Malaysia and southern Thailand. The plane encountered intense thunderstorms along its flight path. The December–January period is the wettest time of the year.

The narrow body Airbus 320-200 lost contact with air traffic control radar at 6:17 a.m. local time on Sunday, 42 minutes into a routine two-hour flight from the Indonesian city of Surabaya to Singapore. Five minutes before it lost contact, the plane’s pilots requested a change of course to avoid a storm, according to the Indonesian state navigation operator AirNav. The request was granted.

The plane’s pilot then asked to increase altitude from 32,000 to 38,000 feet due to the weather conditions, but the request was denied because there were six other planes in the vicinity. The pilots were instead approved to increase their altitude to 34,000 feet. Within three minutes, the plane had disappeared from radar contact entirely.

Unconfirmed secondary radar data of the plane’s flight reportedly show the plane was climbing toward 36,000 feet, at a speed of 353 knots, or approximately 650 kilometres per hour. Geoffrey Thomas, a Sydney-based aviation expert, said that, if true, this would be below the minimum safe speed for this altitude.

“The QZ8501 was flying too slow, about 100 knots [160 kilometres per hour]... too slow,” he told the British *Daily Mail*. “Essentially the plane is flying too slow for the altitude and the thin air, and the wings won’t support it at that speed and you get a stall, an aerodynamic stall.”

According to the newspaper, aviation experts have suggested that a build-up of ice on airspeed sensors, known as pitot tubes, might have given the pilots an incorrect speed measurement. False speed

measurement due to icing is known to have contributed to the crash of Air France Flight AF447 on June 1, 2009 over the South Atlantic Ocean. The plane's pilots were known to be manoeuvring to avoid storm clouds.

Thomas also said that the Airbus 320 is not equipped with the latest radar system for measuring storms and this may have led the pilots to misjudge the storm's severity. "If you don't have what's called a multi-skilled radar you have to tilt the radar yourself manually," Thomas told the *Daily Mail*. "You have to look down to the base of the thunderstorm to see what the intensity of the moisture and the rain is, then you make a judgment of how bad it is. It's manual, so it's possible to make a mistake." The newspaper reported that the more advanced radar system, which was first introduced in 2002, is due to be certified for the Airbus 320 next year.

According to today's *Sydney Morning Herald*, family members of some of the 162 people aboard the flight expressed anger during a meeting with AirAsia chief executive Tony Fernandes at Surabaya airport. The newspaper reported: "Relatives wanted to know why the departure time of QZ8501 had been brought forward from 7.20 a.m. to 5.20 a.m. on Sunday. They were told it was just a routine change... [P]arents said outside that they did not know why, in the face of such bad weather, the flight had not been delayed or cancelled."

Z. Effendy, the uncle of 20-year-old trainee flight assistant Khairunisa Haidar Fauzi, who was aboard the plane, told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "It seems like the answer to a lot of the questions asked is just repeating, 'We lost contact.'" The young woman's father, Haidar Fauzi, added: "The replies were just to humour us. They give you the answer they think you want to hear just to keep you calm."

QZ8501 is operated by AirAsia Indonesia, the Indonesian subsidiary of its Malaysian parent company. AirAsia Airlines, a bankrupt state-owned enterprise, was purchased in Malaysia in 2001 by former music executive Fernandes for just 25 US cents. It has since grown rapidly as a "budget" airline, by undercutting its higher-cost rivals on the basis of ruthless exploitation of its workforce and equipment.

The company's web site boasts an aircraft turnaround time of just 25 minutes, compared to one hour for what it calls a "Full Service Carrier" (FSC). It

operates with an aircraft utilisation rate of 12 hours per day, compared to an FSC usage of just 8 hours. The missing Airbus 320-200 aircraft was first obtained by AirAsia Indonesia in 2008, on lease from European firm Doric. According to a statement by Airbus, the plane had recently been serviced in November. Since it was first obtained by the airline, the plane has undergone 13,600 take-offs and landings and been used for 23,000 flight hours.

The company has generated a personal fortune for Fernandes of \$650 million, making him the 28th richest man in Malaysia, according to *Forbes*. AirAsia's profits jumped 168 percent year-on-year from 2012 to 2013, before declining in 2014.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported on December 29: "Indonesia AirAsia returned to profit in the third quarter of this year after it cut capacity and raised fares to pull back from a bruising battle for market share with local rivals such as Lion Air." Seven Lion Air flights have crashed in the last decade, while the disappearance of QZ8501 is the first disaster for AirAsia.

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