

Many questions unanswered about Malaysia Airlines Flight 370

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The fate of 239 people aboard Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 is surrounded by questions as search vessels and aircraft comb the area of the South China Sea where the aircraft is presumed to have crashed. Flight MH370 took off from Kuala Lumpur at 12.41 a.m. Saturday heading for Beijing and lost contact with Malaysian air traffic controllers at 1.30 a.m. The crew sent out no distress call.

Vietnamese coast guard commander Le Van Minh reported that Vietnamese navy planes had spotted what might be a window or door fragment, but rough seas and darkness were preventing ships from retrieving the item. Yesterday Vietnamese authorities reported locating two oil slicks as long as 15 kilometres off the country's south coast. Search operations involve more than 40 aircraft and two dozen ships from several countries, including Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, China, the US, Australia, Indonesia and Singapore.

Malaysian authorities have reported that the aircraft may have turned back shortly before it vanished, but no details have been released. According to CNN, at the request of Malaysian officials, the Thai navy opened up a second search area in the Andaman Sea, well to the west of MH370's flight path from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing.

The Boeing 777-200ER aircraft was carrying 12 crew and 227 passengers, over half of whom were Chinese citizens, with others from a number of countries, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia, India and the US. The 53-year-old Malaysian pilot, Captain Zaharie Ahmad Shah, had been flying with Malaysia Airlines for three decades and had logged more than 18,000 hours of flying time. His co-pilot Fariq Ab. Hamid was also experienced.

Malaysian Airlines is emphasising its good safety

record. The last fatal accident involving the airline took place nearly two decades ago in September 1995 when its Fokker 50 crashed in Sabah, killing 34 people. The only previous fatalities were in December 1977 when MH Flight 653 was hijacked and crashed in Johor state, killing 100 people on board.

The lack of information has led to speculation about the possible causes for the sudden disappearance of Flight MH370, including catastrophic engine or mechanical failure, freak weather conditions, and a hijacking or terrorist bombing.

The media have focused on the last possibility after it was reported that at least two of the passengers were flying on stolen passports—one Austrian and one Italian. The passports were reportedly stolen in Thailand and used to purchase tickets with consecutive numbers, suggesting they were issued together. Interpol stated that the passports had been listed as stolen on its data base. Details of those travelling on the stolen passports have yet to be released, and, according to several reports, are yet to be determined.

However, Reuters reported that Malaysian investigators were examining the possibility of a security breach at Kuala Lumpur's international airport and a connection to a terrorist attack by Uighur separatists at Kunming railway station in southern China on March 1 that killed at least 29 people. A Malaysian official told Reuters: "This is not being ruled out. We have sent back Uighurs [to China] who had false passports before. It is too early to say whether there is a link."

The media has focused on "terrorism" but Malaysian investigators are ruling out nothing, including abnormal weather, mechanical failure, pilot error or a combination of several factors.

The National Weather Centre of the Malaysian

Meteorological Department has stated that there were no significant changes to the weather pattern along the flight path that would have threatened the safety of the aircraft.

However, the *Star Online* cited Professor Zhao Yifei from the Civil Aviation University of China who said: “I think the possibility that mechanical failure [affected the flight] when it entered into the extreme weather layer is high. The signal of the aircraft disappeared suddenly, which indicates that, except for a terrorist attack, it would have been something the plane was hit hard by [like a] thunderstorm or some other strong blows, like hail.”

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Mei Dongmu, an aircraft designer with the Aviation Industry Corporation of China, also pointed out that aircraft were commonly caught in unpredictable air turbulence. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the aircrew respond. “But of course there are rare cases when due to multiple reasons—the pilot has fallen asleep being one—the threat of the bad weather was noticed only too late and the plane, out of control, plunged headlong towards the ground, or the ocean, as is widely speculated in the current case.”

The possibility of such an event is only compounded by cost-cutting in the international airline industry driven by fierce competition and falling profits, which, in turn, leads to cutting corners on aircraft maintenance and crewing. In February, Malaysia Airlines reported a loss of \$US104 million for the October-December quarter—its fourth consecutive quarterly loss. The overall loss for 2013 was \$357 million.

Moreover, while Boeing has been quick to emphasise the safety of its 777-200ER aircraft, the record is not flawless. The only fatal accident in its 19-year history occurred last year when Asian Airlines Flight 214 crashed while landing at San Francisco. It touched down short of the runway, killing three of the 307 people on board. An investigation is still underway.

Malaysian Airlines did have an incident in August 2005 involving a 777 flying from Perth in Western Australia to Kuala Lumpur. The aircraft’s software incorrectly measured speed and acceleration causing it to suddenly shoot up 915 metres. The pilot disengaged the auto-pilot, corrected and returned to Perth. The software problem was subsequently corrected.

The closest immediate parallel to the weekend’s Malaysia Airlines mystery was the sudden disappearance of Air France Flight 447 in normal weather conditions on June 1, 2009 while travelling from Rio de Janeiro to Paris. The first major wreckage was found within five days, but it was not until May 2011 that the aircraft’s black boxes were finally recovered for analysis. The final report in July 2012 pointed to a complex interaction of technical malfunctions and inappropriate crew responses that led to the plane stalling and crashing. All 216 passengers and 12 crew were killed.



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