Searches fail to locate Malaysia Airlines Flight 370

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Three days of intense air-and-sea search operations have produced no breakthrough in the investigation of the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370. The aircraft vanished early Saturday morning, less than an hour into its flight from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing and is presumed to have crashed with the loss of all 239 people on board.

Some 40 ships and 34 planes from nine countries, including Malaysia, China, Vietnam, the US and Singapore, are involved in searching the South China Sea. The operation has been expanded to 100 nautical miles from the point where contact was lost with MH370. The crew sent out no distress call.

Investigators have discounted sightings of debris, including objects thought to resemble a yellow life raft and an aircraft window or door. Tests also demonstrated that oil slicks discovered in the search area contained no jet fuel and were therefore unrelated to the missing aircraft.

Malaysia's civil aviation chief Azharuddin Abdul Rahman admitted to the media that the aircraft's disappearance was "puzzling" and "perplexing." Search crews were working around the clock, he said, but "unfortunately we have not found anything that appears to be an object from the aircraft."

Of the 227 passengers, 154 were from either China or Taiwan. The Chinese government, which is under pressure from passengers' families and widespread media scrutiny, has urged Malaysia to step up search efforts. A *Global Times* editorial yesterday was openly critical, declaring that "the Malaysian side cannot shirk its responsibilities." Two teams of Chinese officials have arrived in Kuala Lumpur to liaise with their Malaysian counterparts.

Media speculation has mushroomed in inverse proportion to the few facts available. The sudden disappearance of an aircraft, in apparently good weather and with experienced pilots, has fuelled theories ranging from "terrorism" to catastrophic mechanical failure and pilot error.

Various terrorist scenarios have focused on two passengers travelling on the stolen passports of an Austrian and an Italian citizen. The individuals have been identified in CCTV footage, but Malaysian authorities issued contradictory details. On Sunday night, Malaysia's home minister said they were of Asian appearance, but yesterday, Rahman declared them non-Asian.

Thai police interviewed a travel agent in Pattaya, Thailand who sold the tickets to an Iranian known as Ali on behalf of two people heading for separate destinations in Europe. The particular flights were chosen because they were the cheapest.

John Magaw, former head of the US Transport Security Administration, told the BBC that "quite a few people" travelled in Asia with "improper identification or false identification." While some might be involved in criminal activities, many were simply seeking a better life in Europe or the US.

INTERPOL has an international database of more than 40 million stolen travel documents, but it is often not checked by airlines.

Several media reports said four passengers on MH370 checked-in their luggage but did not board, raising the issue of a bomb being planted on the plane. Rahman, however, dismissed the suggestion, noting that the luggage was taken off the aircraft and returned to its owners.

Less attention has been paid to the possibility of mechanical failure or pilot error, or a combination of both. Malaysia Airlines has a relatively good safety record, with its only fatal incidents occurring nearly two decades ago. The aircraft—a Boeing 777-200ER—suffered a broken wing tip during a minor incident while taxiing at Shanghai's international airport in 2012, but the plane was repaired

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and certified airworthy.

The fact remains that Malaysia Airlines, like its rivals, is engaged in fierce cost cutting as it struggles to remain viable. The state-run carrier has suffered losses over the past three years and has imposed cuts, including to maintenance—possibly causing mechanical flaws in aircraft. The airline is facing stiff competition in Asia, especially from the budget airline AirAsia, which also mainly operates from a Kuala Lumpur hub.

The *Wall Street Journal* commented yesterday: "Budget airlines were virtually non-existent in Asia just a decade ago. But they now command a more than 50 percent share of all air passenger traffic in South East Asia, thanks in large part to the success of AirAsia." Malaysia Airlines' financial difficulties are compounded by a slowdown in passenger demands since the 2008 global financial crisis.

The disappearance of MH370 bears some similarities to that of Air France Flight 447, which vanished over the Atlantic in 2009. It took five days of searching to find any wreckage and more than two years to locate the "black box" data recorders. A final report concluded that the plane had crashed as a result of a technical malfunction, combined with pilot misjudgments.

The failure to find MH370 highlights the refusal to act on calls for the upgrading of aircraft data recording systems following the Air France disaster. In comments to *Popular Mechanics*, former US National Transportation Safety Board member John Goglia said the suggested improvements included prolonged battery life for black box recorders, and a duplicate set that would automatically eject and float in the event of a crash. "This was on our wish list after AF447, but it went nowhere," he said.

Other proposals included the streaming of flight data on board to a secure location where they could be analysed to help identify the precise location of a crash. However, due to the costs involved, no such system has been developed.

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