AirAsia flight lost over Java Sea

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In another disturbing incident involving a passenger aircraft, AirAsia Indonesia Flight QZ8501 vanished yesterday morning while on a standard two-hour flight of just 1,360 kilometres between the Indonesian city of Surabaya and Singapore. On board the missing aircraft were seven crew and 155 passengers, of whom 149 were Indonesian citizens, three South Koreans and one person from each of the United Kingdom, Malaysia and Singapore. The flight's first officer was a French national.

According to available information, the plane was a six-year-old, narrow body Airbus 320-200 which had received maintenance in November and was being piloted by two experienced aviators. It took off from Juanda International Airport in Surabaya at 5.35am. Shortly before all contact was lost with the aircraft, one of its pilots made a request to deviate from the scheduled flight path to avoid thunderstorms. One minute before it vanished, at 6.17am, a request was made to increase altitude from 32,000 feet to up to 38,000 feet due to the weather.

Regions of South East Asia have been experiencing significant monsoonal storms and heavy rainfall. Large areas of eastern Malaysia and southern Thailand have been flooded. In the past several days, the southern Malay peninsula and Singapore have been hit by severe storms.

When the flight disappeared from radar, it is believed to have been above the Java Sea, some 20 nautical miles east of the Indonesian island of Belitung and west of Kalimantan, the Indonesian region of the island of Borneo. This area of the Java Sea is one of the key sea passages to and from both the Sunda Strait and the Straits of Malacca and is heavily used by international shipping. For that reason, it is also an area of key geo-political importance and is continuously monitored by military satellites operated by a number of states.

No wreckage of the aircraft has yet been found and initial searches by Indonesian naval and police vessels on Sunday were suspended due to stormy conditions. Malaysian, Singaporean and Australian ships and aircraft are now joining the search, which has resumed today.

AirAsia Indonesia is 48.9 percent owned by its Malaysian parent company, which has grown rapidly since it was bought in 2001 as a bankrupt state enterprise for just 25 US cents by Malaysian businessman Tony Fernandes. It is one of the most ruthlessly operated of the low-cost airlines, with very high productivity rates extracted from its workforce, an aircraft turnaround time of 25 minutes and an aircraft utilisation rate of 13 hours per day—among the highest internationally. The loss of Flight QZ8501 is the first disaster involving an AirAsia aircraft.

Experts spoken to by various media outlets have raised a range of questions about how, just nine months after the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370, another aircraft has vanished without a trace.

At no point did the pilots issue a "pan-pan" call, which means the flight needs to urgently change course or destination, or a mayday call, indicating that the flight was in serious distress. Mary Schiavo, a former inspector general for the US Department of Transportation, told CNN: "It's disconcerting in that the standard procedures for an emergency don't seem to have been followed."

Steve Marks, an aviation lawyer based in Miami, told *USA Today* that it was "inexcusable" that airlines are still relying solely on radar to track flights and not also using satellites. "The technology exists and has existed for years," he said. "It has not been implemented."

Peter Marosszeky, a former maintenance manager for United Airlines and a lecturer in aviation at Australia's University of New South Wales, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: "Everything tends to point to the fact that the pilot did request an altitude change to a high altitude maybe at the wrong time, and it was caught in a fairly severe sort of updraft and the aircraft possibly went into a stall condition."

Marosszeky continued: "[W]e have to remember that this aeroplane is not a large aircraft. It's a fairly light aircraft and flying into those severe conditions in the tropics, particularly around the equator, can be

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challenging. I suspect very strongly that the aircraft maybe should not have been in that area at that time, but that's another thing for the investigators to talk about."

Alan Diehl, a former accident investigator for the US Air Force and the National Transportation Safety Board, told CNN that initial information raised parallels with the circumstances surrounding the crash of Air Algerie Flight AH5017 over Mali, Africa on July 24. Investigations are continuing, but it is known that aircraft deviated from its flight path and changed its speed and altitude in order to avoid a massive storm system. Shortly before contact was lost, the pilots requested permission to turn back to Burkina Faso. All 116 passengers and crew were killed when it spiralled into the ground.

Questions continue to surround the other major airline disasters in 2014.

A Dutch-headed investigation has still not produced any evidence to support allegations that Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 was downed on July 17 over Ukraine by Russian-speaking separatists using a surface-to-air missile. Russian sources continue to allege that it was shot down by Ukrainian air force jets. What is known is that Malaysia Airlines, unlike a number of international carriers, continued to use a flight path over an area of Ukraine wracked by civil war because fuel costs would have been higher if they diverted around the region.

In regards to the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 on March 8, questions remain unanswered as to why the aircraft had switched course, flew back across the Malay Peninsula and then possibly continued south west into the Indian Ocean until it ran out of fuel. Months of searching have failed to find any trace of it.

A total of 815 passengers and crew were on board the four lost flights.

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