

Wreckage of crashed AirAsia flight found in Java Sea

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The three day search for missing AirAsia Flight QZ8501 concluded last night with the discovery of debris from the plane, as well as several human bodies, in the Java Sea off the coast of Borneo. The wreckage was found approximately 100 kilometres south-east of the plane's last recorded flight position.

The discovery confirms the death of the 162 people on board, including 155 passengers and seven flight crew. Those killed were 155 Indonesians, three South Koreans, one Briton, one Malaysian and one Singaporean, as well as the co-pilot, a French national. Various reports place the number of children and infants on the flight between 15 and 18. A diving team is now in the process of retrieving the bodies of those aboard. At least two have been recovered already. The crash brings the number of people killed in air accidents in 2014 to 1,320, the highest number since 2005.

Questions have already emerged, including from relatives of those killed, about why the plane's journey was approved, given the treacherous weather conditions along its flight path. According to a *Sydney Morning Herald* article published yesterday, relatives who met with AirAsia CEO Tony Fernandes at Surabaya airport also demanded to know why the flight time was brought forward by two hours on Sunday morning.

Flight QZ8501 lost contact with air traffic control at 6:18 a.m. Sunday, approximately 42 minutes into a routine two hour flight from Surabaya to Singapore. Weather data shows that the plane was encountering massive thunderstorms. Much of South East Asia is being buffeted by torrential rains and monsoonal storms, which have flooded parts of Malaysia and Thailand. The area is part of a region of extreme weather known as the Intercontinental Tropical Convergence Zone over the Earth's equator, where

thunderstorms form regularly.

In the wake of the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 in March, the three day search for the AirAsia flight has once again highlighted the refusal of major international airline corporations to pay for satellite technology to track the location of their aircraft. Airlines continue to rely solely on radar communications. Miami aviation lawyer Steve Marks said it was "inexcusable" that satellite tracking was not being used, *USA Today* reported on December 29. "The technology exists and has existed for years," he said. "It has not been implemented."

Airline companies also refuse to pay for live satellite transmissions of all in-flight data, including audio recordings from inside the cockpit, which could be used to help determine what caused a plane crash. The information is currently stored only inside the plane's "black box," meaning that it has to be recovered before any investigation can be carried out.

While there has been no explanation for the cause of the crash, aviation experts have focussed on the dangerous weather conditions, as well as whether low altitude, speed, and icing on the aeroplane's measuring devices were involved.

At approximately 6:12 a.m., the pilots contacted air traffic control to request a leftward deviation in their route of seven miles in order to avoid a thunderstorm. The request was approved. They then asked to increase altitude from 32,000 to 38,000 feet, a common manoeuvre for avoiding the heavy turbulence generated by pressure differences in thunderstorms. Traffic control denied the request, however, because there were six other planes in the vicinity cruising at a higher altitude. Minutes later, traffic controllers approved a rise to 34,000 feet but the plane had dropped out of radar contact.

It is unclear why the AirAsia plane was travelling at a significantly lower altitude than the six other planes in its vicinity, which included aircraft belonging to Garuda Indonesia, Lion Air (another Indonesian-based airline) and Emirates, as well as two other AirAsia flights, all of which were flying above 34,000 feet. This may have been influenced by the fact that QZ8051, a lighter, single-aisle commercial jet, was on a short two hour trip, and carrying a full load of passengers and fuel. AirAsia has not commented on whether the decision to move the flight's departure time forward by two hours impacted on the congestion around the thunderstorm, limiting the pilots' options.

Secondary, unverified radar data published online shows that the pilots had climbed from 32,000 feet and reached an altitude of 36,000 feet, but with a ground speed of just 353 knots, or 650 kilometres per hour. Aviation experts have commented that if this data is correct, the aircraft was travelling at an insufficient speed for its altitude, which could have led to a stall.

A report into the crash of Air France Flight AF447 on June 1, 2009, which killed all 228 people on board, found that the plane's pitot tubes, used for measuring ground speed, had iced over and gave false measurements. The aircraft crashed after it stalled.

Tim Vasquez, a former US Air Force meteorologist and administrator of weathergraphics.com, conducted an analysis of weather conditions during Flight QZ8501, and concluded that icing was a possibility. He noted that the critical icing layer of the thunderstorm extends from 17,000 to 23,000 feet, while lower temperatures at higher altitudes make icing less likely. The Air France flight, however, had revealed that icing can occur at higher altitudes.

Hanna Simatupang, an aviation expert and former investigator at Indonesia's National Transportation Safety Committee, told the *Jakarta Post* that there may have been something wrong with the aircraft which caused its emergency transmitter locator not to emit any signal.

Hanna told the newspaper that aviation firms and the authorities in Indonesia did not operate on a "safety first" policy "because aviation still sees profit as the priority."

The incident has also raised questions about what live weather and storm data is available to pilots. Geoffrey Thomas, a Sydney-based aviation expert, told the *Daily*

Mail newspaper that the A320 plane was not equipped with the latest weather radar monitor for measuring the severity of storms—equipment that has been available since 2002. Thomas said that because the older system on the A320 required manual operation, "it's possible to make a mistake."

Bob Marshall, the chief executive of Earth Networks, a global provider of weather data, told the *New York Times* on December 30: "There's more technology and automated alerting on some of the apps on your smartphone than are on these planes today. The vast majority of the world lacks adequate technology and alerting that pilots need to help keep the plane out of harm's way."

Underlying all of the decision making processes in the commercial airline industry are the immediate profit interests of the giant airline corporations involved. Aircraft costs, maintenance and staff are being slashed as a result of the ruthless struggle internationally for market share, which in one way or another increases the danger of serious accidents.



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