

# Plane debris likely to be from missing flight MH370

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Paris deputy prosecutor Serge Mackowiak announced at a press conference on Wednesday that plane debris discovered on July 29 probably belongs to Malaysia Airlines flight MH370. The airplane disappeared 17 months ago en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, with 239 people aboard.

Investigators have already conclusively confirmed that the two metre-long flaperon, which is part of the plane wing and helps control speed and roll, is from a Boeing 777, the same model as flight MH370. Apart from MH370, no other Boeing 777 has been reported missing.

“There exists a very high probability that the flaperon indeed belongs to flight MH370,” Mackowiak said. This was based on “technical documentation” provided by Malaysia Airlines, which allowed investigators to “establish a link between the item examined by the experts and the flaperon from the MH370 Boeing 777 in terms of their common technical characteristics.”

The flaperon was sent to France one week ago for analysis at a military laboratory in Toulouse. It was found washed ashore on Réunion Island, a French territory located in the far west Indian Ocean, east of Madagascar and south of Mauritius. The island is more than 3,700 km from where the plane is believed to have crashed in the southern Indian Ocean.

The Toulouse laboratory, which is among the most advanced of its kind, was used in the analysis of an Air France flight which crashed over the Atlantic in 2009. Representatives from Boeing, the Malaysian and Chinese governments, along with the United States National Transport Safety Board and the Australian Transport Safety Bureau, are also involved in the forensic survey. Mackowiak did not confirm when more detailed results would be released, only that this would be carried out “as quickly as possible.”

The announcement means that the flaperon is likely the first piece of positive evidence that MH370 did indeed crash somewhere in the Indian Ocean, as had been widely expected. Until now, the search for the plane had relied on small amounts of satellite data that were used to estimate the last known location of the flight before it crashed.

The French defence ministry announced on Thursday that it would be carrying out operations on Réunion Island—including foot patrols, helicopter, plane and naval search operations—in search of any more debris that may have washed ashore.

While French investigators have refused to state that the wing-flap is certainly from MH370, Mackowiak’s announcement was pre-empted several hours earlier on Thursday by a statement by Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak.

Razak told reporters, “Today, 515 days since the plane disappeared, it is with a very heavy heart that I must tell you that an international team of experts has conclusively confirmed that the aircraft debris found on Réunion Island is indeed from MH370.”

The Malaysian government, which has been heavily criticised by the families of those aboard the flight over its response to MH370’s disappearance, is determined to bring the affair to a conclusion.

Criticising the discrepancy between the Malaysian government and French investigators, K.S. Narendran, whose wife was aboard MH370, told CNN, “I didn’t hear facts. I didn’t hear the basics. I heard nothing, and so it leaves me wondering whether there is a foregone conclusion, and everybody is racing to the finish [of the investigation].”

The disappearance of MH370 has compounded the financial crisis facing the state-owned Malaysian Airlines. The airline had posted substantial losses for

the previous three years even before the crashing, within the space of less than five months, of MH370 and flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine in July 2014.

Investigators are now seeking to glean any information they can from the wing flap about how MH370 crashed, including any evidence of an explosion or fire. Experts have also noted that structural deformities may provide insights into the way the plane struck the water. However, Jim Wildey, the former chief of the materials laboratory of the US National Transport Safety Board, said that “if they find just one piece, it’s going to be a stretch” to assess how the accident occurred.

The wing-flap was encrusted with barnacles and scientists have noted that any marine life trapped on the flaperon may provide some limited information about where it had been. The immense complexity of ocean-current modelling makes it virtually impossible, however, to back-track the flaperon’s journey to where the plane crashed.

At present the search operation for the main plane fuselage has covered approximately half of the 120,000 square kilometre area at the bottom of the Indian Ocean where it is believed to be resting. The fuselage most likely contains the plane’s black boxes, which hold the most critical in-flight data—including audio recordings from the cockpit—for determining how and why MH370 crashed.

In June 2014, the Australian Transport Safety Board (ATSB) predicted, based on a study of then current modelling, that the most likely place for plane debris to drift ashore was on the western coast of Sumatra, in Indonesia. The ATSB announced last Wednesday, however, that a second modelling carried out in November last year and updated last month suggested that this was highly unlikely.

While the ATSB stated that the false prediction did not affect search efforts, an article published today in the *Daily Beast* stated that when questioned by the news agency earlier this year about its predictions, the ATSB failed to report what it knew there were errors in its modelling.

The most glaring inconsistency in the official investigation, however, is the omission of any satellite data from the United States and Australian militaries, which are involved in continuous monitoring of the Indo-Pacific region. Washington, with active Australian

support, is engaged in a steady military build-up aimed against China. All of the regional countries, including, India, Singapore and Thailand, have been reticent to publish any satellite data which could reveal their intelligence capabilities to rivals.

This raises the obvious question of what is already known by the military and intelligence agencies of these countries, above all Australia and the US, about MH370.



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