

After 6 days, Malaysian jet mystery still unsolved

March 13 2014, by Chris Brummitt



An Indonesian Air Force officer draws a flight pattern flown earlier in a search operation for the missing Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777, during a post-mission briefing at Suwondo air base in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia, Thursday, March 13, 2014. The hunt for the missing jetliner has been punctuated by false leads since it disappeared with 239 people aboard about an hour after leaving Kuala Lumpur for Beijing early Saturday. (AP Photo/Binsar Bakkara)

An oil slick on the sea. A purported wrong turn to the west seen on

military radar. Questionable satellite photos. Passengers boarding with stolen passports.

After six days, what seemed like potential clues to the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 have all led nowhere.

"This situation is unprecedented. MH370 went completely silent over the open ocean," said acting Transport Minister Hishammuddin Hussein. "This is a crisis situation. It is a very complex operation, and it is not obviously easy. We are devoting all our energies to the task at hand."

On Thursday, Malaysian authorities expanded their [search](#) westward toward India, saying the aircraft with 239 people aboard may have flown for several hours after its last contact with the ground shortly after takeoff early Saturday from Kuala Lumpur for Beijing.

The U.S. Navy 7th Fleet said it is moving one of its ships, the USS Kidd, into the Strait of Malacca, west of Malaysia.

The international search is methodically sweeping the ocean on both sides of Malaysia. The total area being covered is about 35,800 square miles (92,600 square kilometers)—about the size of Portugal.

One part of the hunt is in the South China Sea, where the aircraft was seen on civilian radar flying northeast before vanishing without any indication of technical problems. A similar-sized search is also being conducted in the Strait of Malacca because of military radar sightings that might indicate the plane turned in that direction after its last contact, passing over the Malay Peninsula.

The jet had enough fuel to reach deep into the Indian Ocean.

"Because of new information, we may be part of an effort to open a new

search area in the Indian Ocean," White House spokesman Jay Carney said, declining to offer additional details about that information or the new area.

In the latest disappointment, search planes failed to find any debris from the Boeing 777 after they were sent Thursday to an area of the South China Sea off the southern tip of Vietnam where satellite images published on a Chinese government website reportedly showed three suspected floating objects.

"There is nothing. We went there. There is nothing," Hishammuddin said.



Children read messages and well wishes displayed for all involved with the missing Malaysia Airlines jetliner MH370 on the walls of the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Thursday, March 13, 2014 in Sepang, Malaysia. Planes sent Thursday to check the spot where Chinese satellite images showed possible debris from the missing Malaysian jetliner found nothing, Malaysia's civil aviation chief said, deflating the latest lead in the six-day hunt. The hunt for the

missing Malaysia Airlines flight 370 has been punctuated by false leads since it disappeared with 239 people aboard about an hour after leaving Kuala Lumpur for Beijing early Saturday. (AP Photo/Wong Maye-E)

Compounding the frustration, he later said the Chinese Embassy had notified the government the images were released by mistake and did not show any debris from the missing flight.

The Wall Street Journal quoted U.S. investigators as saying they suspected the plane stayed in the air for about four hours after its last confirmed contact, citing engine data automatically transmitted to the ground as part of a routine maintenance program. The newspaper later corrected the account to say the information came from the plane's satellite communication link, not the engines.

Hishammuddin dismissed the initial report. He said Boeing and Rolls-Royce, the engine manufacturer, both said the last engine data was received at 1:07 a.m., 23 minutes before the plane's transponders, which identify it to commercial radar and nearby aircraft, stopped working.

Asked if it were possible that the plane kept flying for several hours, Hishammuddin said: "Of course. We can't rule anything out. This is why we have extended the search. We are expanding our search into the Andaman Sea." The sea is northwest of the Malay Peninsula.

He said Malaysia was asking for radar data from India and other neighboring countries to see if they can trace it flying northwest. India says its navy, air force and coast guard will search for the plane in the south Andaman Sea.

More than two-thirds of those on Flight MH370 were from China, which

has shown impatience with the absence of any results. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang said Thursday in Beijing he would like to see better coordination among countries in the search.

The passengers' "families and friends are burning with anxiety. The Chinese government and Chinese people are all deeply concerned about their safety," he said at the close of the annual session of the country's legislature. "As long as there is a glimmer of hope, we will not stop searching for the plane."

He said China had eight ships and 10 satellites searching for the plane.

Malaysia has been criticized for its handling of the search, in part because it took several days to fully explain why it couldn't say whether the plane had turned back. Officials say they are not hiding anything and are searching areas where the plane is most likely to be, while trying to establish its actual location.

Besides the Chinese satellite photos and the so-far fruitless search based on the possible sighting on military radar, there have been other developments in the aviation mystery that have failed to lead to finding the plane or the cause of its disappearance:



A crew member of a Royal Malaysian Air Force CN-235 aircraft looks out the window during a search and rescue operation for the missing Malaysia Airlines plane over the Straits of Malacca, Thursday, March 13, 2014. Planes sent Thursday to check the spot where Chinese satellite images showed possible debris from the missing Malaysian jetliner found nothing, Malaysia's civil aviation chief said, deflating the latest lead in the six-day hunt. The hunt for the missing Malaysia Airlines flight 370 has been punctuated by false leads since it disappeared with 239 people aboard about an hour after leaving Kuala Lumpur for Beijing early Saturday. (AP Photo/Lai Seng Sin)

— Oil slicks seen Saturday were found to have nothing to do with the jetliner.

— A yellow object spotted by a search plane turned out to be ordinary sea trash.

— Officials initially said four or five passengers checked in for the flight but did not board, fueling speculation about terrorism. Officials

later said some people with reservations never checked in and were simply replaced by standby passengers, and no baggage was removed.

— Officials said two men, later identified as Iranians, boarded the plane with stolen passports. It was later reported that they were unlikely to be linked to terrorist groups.

Investigators have not ruled out any possible cause for the plane's disappearance.



A pilot of a Royal Malaysian Air Force CN-235 aircraft shows a map during a search and rescue operation for the missing Malaysia Airlines plane over the waters at Malacca straits, Malaysia, Thursday, March 13, 2014. Planes sent Thursday to check the spot where Chinese satellite images showed possible debris from the missing Malaysian jetliner found nothing, Malaysia's civil aviation chief said, deflating the latest lead in the six-day hunt. The hunt for the missing Malaysia Airlines flight 370 has been punctuated by false leads since it disappeared with 239 people aboard about an hour after leaving Kuala Lumpur

for Beijing early Saturday. (AP Photo/Lai Seng Sin)

Experts say a massive failure knocking out electrical systems, while unlikely, could explain why the transponders were not working. Another possibility is that the pilot, or a passenger, likely one with some technical knowledge, switched off the transponders in the hope of flying undetected.

"There is no real precedent for a situation like this. The plane just vanished," Hishammuddin said.

Experts say that if the plane crashed into the ocean, some debris should be floating even if most of the jet is submerged. Past experience shows that finding the wreckage can take weeks or even longer, especially if the location of the [plane](#) is in doubt.

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