

Search for missing jet expands toward Indian Ocean

March 14 2014, by Chris Brummitt



Officer Lang Van Ngan of the Vietnam Air Force looks out the window onboard a flying AN-26 Soviet made aircraft during a search operation for the missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 plane over the southern sea between Vietnam and Malaysia Friday, March 14, 2014. Vietnam says it has downgraded but not stopped its search for the missing jetliner in the South China Sea and has been asked by Malaysian authorities to consider sending planes and ships to the Strait of Malacca. (AP Photo/Na Son Nguyen)

The international search for the missing Malaysian jetliner expanded

westward Friday toward the Indian Ocean amid signs the aircraft may have flown on for hours after its last contact with air-traffic control nearly a week ago.

A U.S. official told The Associated Press that the Malaysia Airlines plane sent signals to a satellite for four hours after the aircraft went missing early last Saturday, raising the possibility the jet carrying 239 people could have flown far from the current search areas. It also increased speculation that whatever happened to the plane was a deliberate act.

If the plane had disintegrated during flight or had suffered some other catastrophic failure, all signals—the pings to the satellite, the data messages and the transponder—would be expected to stop at the same time. Experts say a pilot or passengers with technical expertise may have switched off the transponder in the hope of flying undetected.

No theory, however, has been ruled out in one of aviation history's most puzzling mysteries.

The Beijing-bound aircraft last communicated with air traffic base stations east of Malaysia in the South China Sea, which for several days has the main focus of the search. Planes and ships also have been searching the Strait of Malacca west of Malaysia because of a blip on military radar suggested the plane might have turned in that direction after the last confirmed contact.

If the plane flew another four hours, it could be much farther away.

Indian ships and planes have been searching northwest of Malaysia in the eastern Andaman Sea, and on Friday expanded their search to areas west of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands chain Friday, said V.S.R. Murty, an Indian Coast Guard inspector-general.

The White House said the U.S. may be drawn into a new phase of the search in the vast Indian Ocean but did not offer details. The U.S. Navy 7th Fleet said it was moving one of its ships, the USS Kidd, into the Strait of Malacca.

Vietnam, which has been heavily involved in the search from the start, downgraded its hunt in the South China Sea to regular from emergency by reducing the frequency of aircraft flights and cruises by ships involved, said Lt. Gen. Vo Van Tuan, deputy chief of staff of Vietnamese People's Army.

"We are prepared for the case that the search mission will last long and we have to maintain our forces that way," he said.

The U.S. official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to discuss the situation by name, said the Boeing 777-200 wasn't transmitting data to the satellite but was sending a signal to establish contact.



Muslim men arrive at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport Mosque for afternoon prayers where a special prayer session will be offered for the missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, Friday, March 14, 2014 in Sepang, Malaysia. Vietnam says it has downgraded but not stopped its search for the missing jetliner in the South China Sea and has been asked by Malaysian authorities to consider sending planes and ships to the Strait of Malacca. The statement Friday is a sign that the focus of the search effort is switching to the west of Malaysia, to the strait and further west into the Indian Ocean. (AP Photo/Wong Maye-E)

Boeing offers a satellite service that can receive a stream of data during flight on how the aircraft is functioning and relay the information to the plane's home base. The idea is to provide information before the plane lands on whether maintenance work or repairs are needed.

Malaysia Airlines didn't subscribe to that service, but the plane still had the capability to connect with the satellite and was automatically sending pings, the official said.

"It's like when your cellphone is off but it still sends out a little 'I'm here' message to the cellphone network," the official said. "That's how sometimes they can triangulate your position even though you're not calling because the phone every so often sends out a little bleep. That's sort of what this thing was doing."

Malaysia's Transport Ministry said Friday it could not various verify reports quoting U.S. officials, but said Malaysian investigators were working closely with a U.S. team that has been in Kuala Lumpur since Sunday. Boeing did not comment.

Messages involving a different, more rudimentary data service also were

received from the airliner for a short time after the plane's transponder—a device used to identify the plane to radar—went silent, the U.S. official said.

On Thursday, 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.

Malaysia's acting Transport Minister Hishammuddin Hussein 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.

Hishammuddin said Malaysia was asking for radar data from India and other neighboring countries to see if they can trace it flying northwest. There was no word Friday that any other country had such details on the plane, and they may not exist.



Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, center, arrives at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport Mosque for Friday prayers where a special prayer was offered for the missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, Friday, March 14, 2014 in Sepang, Malaysia. Vietnam says it has downgraded but not stopped its search for the missing jetliner in the South China Sea and has been asked by Malaysian authorities to consider sending planes and ships to the Strait of Malacca. The statement Friday is a sign that the focus of the search effort is switching to the west of Malaysia, to the strait and further west into the Indian Ocean. (AP Photo/Wong Maye-E)

In Thailand, secondary surveillance radar, which requires a signal from aircraft, runs 24 hours a day, but primary surveillance radar, which requires no signal at all, ordinarily shuts down at night, said a Royal Thai Air Force officer who asked not to be named because he is not authorized to talk to the media on the issue.

Air Marshal Vinod Patni, a retired Indian air force officer and a defense

expert, said radar facilities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands area don't work around the clock, either. "These are generally switched on and off as and when required. A radar may be kept on for 24 hours on certain days. I won't say that the Indian radars are highly sophisticated in the region," he said."

Patni also said there are gaps in the coverage areas, including within the area being searched for the missing plane. He couldn't give an exact location for specific gaps, but said pilots are well aware of them.

The possibility that the plane flew long after its last confirmed contact opens the possibility that one of the pilots, or someone with flying experience, wanted to hijack the plane for some later purpose, kidnap the passengers or commit suicide by plunging the aircraft into the sea.

Mike Glynn, a committee member of the Australian and International Pilots Association, said he considers pilot suicide to be the most likely explanation for the disappearance, as was suspected in a SilkAir crash during a flight from Singapore to Jakarta in 1997 and an EgyptAir flight from Los Angeles to Cairo in 1999.



A woman walks past message cards tied up for passengers aboard a missing Malaysia Airlines plane, outside a shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Friday, March 14, 2014. A U.S. official said that the missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 pinged a satellite for four hours after it went missing, indicating that it may have stayed in the air long after its last contact with the ground. Malaysian authorities are widening their search westward, toward India, as a result. (AP Photo/Lai Seng Sin)

"A pilot rather than a hijacker is more likely to be able to switch off the communications equipment," Glynn said. "The last thing that I, as a pilot, want is suspicion to fall on the crew, but it's happened twice before."

Glynn said a pilot may have sought to fly the plane into the Indian Ocean to reduce the chances of recovering data recorders, and to conceal the cause of the disaster.

Experts said 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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