

Plane search spreads through Australia-sized zone

March 18 2014, by Chris Brummitt



A relative of Chinese passengers aboard the missing Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 waits for a news briefing by the Airlines' officials at a hotel ballroom in Beijing, China, Tuesday, March 18, 2014. Families of the passengers aboard the missing plane decided to organize a hunger strike to express their anger and disappointment at the handling of the situation by authorities. They decided on the action after a daily morning meeting with two officials from Malaysia Airlines. The plane has been missing since March 8, and contradictory information plus the fact there has been no sign of the plane has left family members frustrated. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

Investigators trying to solve the mystery of a missing Malaysian jetliner received some belated help Tuesday from Thailand, whose military said it took 10 days to report radar blips that might have been the plane "because we did not pay attention to it."

A coalition of 26 countries, including Thailand, is looking for Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, which vanished March 8 with 239 people aboard on a night flight from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. Search crews are scouring two giant arcs of territory amounting to the size of Australia—half of it in the remote seas of the southern Indian Ocean.

Cmdr. William Marks, a spokesman for the U.S. 7th Fleet, said finding the [plane](#) was like trying to locate a few people somewhere between New York and California.

Malaysian officials said early in the search that they suspected the plane backtracked and flew toward the Strait of Malacca, just west of Malaysia. But it took a week for them to confirm Malaysian military radar data that suggested that route. On Tuesday, Thai military officials said their own radar showed an unidentified plane, possibly Flight 370, flying toward the strait beginning minutes after the Malaysian jet's transponder signal was lost.

Air force spokesman Air Vice Marshal Montol Suchookorn said the Thai military doesn't know whether the plane it detected was Flight 370.

Thailand's failure to quickly share possible information about the plane may not substantially change what Malaysian officials now know, but it raises questions about the degree to which some countries are sharing their defense data.

Flight 370 took off from Kuala Lumpur at 12:40 a.m. Malaysian time March 8 and its transponder, which allows air traffic controllers to

identify and track the airplane, ceased communicating at 1:20 a.m.

Montol said that at 1:28 a.m., Thai military radar "was able to detect a signal, which was not a normal signal, of a plane flying in the direction opposite from the MH370 plane," back toward Kuala Lumpur. The plane later turned right, toward Butterworth, a Malaysian city along the Malacca strait. The radar signal was infrequent and did not include any data such as the flight number.

When asked why it took so long to release the information, Montol said, "Because we did not pay any attention to it. The Royal Thai Air Force only looks after any threats against our country." He said the plane never entered Thai airspace and that Malaysia's initial request for information in the early days of the search was not specific.

"When they asked again and there was new information and assumptions from (Malaysian) Prime Minister Najib Razak, we took a look at our information again," Montol said. "It didn't take long for us to figure out, although it did take some experts to find out about it."

The search area for the plane initially focused on the South China Sea, where ships and planes spent a week searching. Pings that a satellite detected from the plane hours after its communications went down eventually led authorities to concentrate instead on two vast arcs—one into central Asia and the other into the Indian Ocean.

Malaysia said over the weekend that the loss of communications and change in the aircraft's course were deliberate, whether it was the pilots or others aboard who were responsible.



Passengers walk to check in at Malaysia Airlines counters at Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang, Malaysia, Tuesday, March 18, 2014. Checks into the background of all the Chinese nationals on board the missing Malaysian jetliner have uncovered no links to terrorism, the Chinese ambassador in Kuala Lumpur said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Lai Seng Sin)

Malaysian police are considering the possibility of hijacking, sabotage, terrorism or issues related to the mental health of the pilots or anyone else on board, but have yet to give any update on what they have uncovered.

Investigators had pointed to a sequence of events in which two communications systems were disabled in succession—one of them before a voice from the cockpit gave an all-clear message to ground controllers—as evidence of a deliberate attempt to fly the plane off-course in a hard-to-detect way. On Monday, they backtracked on the timing of the first switch-off, saying it was possible that both were cut at

around the same time, leading to fresh speculation that some kind of sudden mechanical or electrical failure might explain the flight going off-course.

Malaysia Airlines CEO Ahmad Jauhari Yahya said it was not out of the question that there was some kind of problem aboard the plane, though he noted it still was intact enough to send a signal to a satellite several hours later.

As further confirmation that someone was still guiding the plane after it disappeared from civilian radar, airline pilots and aviation safety experts said an onboard computer called the flight management system would have to be deliberately programmed in order to follow the pathway taken by the plane as described by Malaysian authorities.

"If you are going to fly the airplane to a waypoint that is not a straight ... route to Beijing, and you were going to command the flight management computer and the autopilot system, you really have to know how to fly the airplane," said John Gadzinski, a U.S. Boeing 737 captain.

"If you were a basic flight student and I put you in an airborne 777 and gave you 20 minutes of coaching, I could have you turn the airplane left and right and the auto throttle and the autopilot would make the airplane do what you want," he said. "But to program a waypoint into the flight management computer, if that is what they flew over, is a little bit harder."

Investigators have asked security agencies in countries with passengers on board to carry out background checks.

China announced Tuesday that background checks of the 154 Chinese citizens on board turned up no links to terrorism, apparently ruling out the possibility that Uighur Muslim militants who have been blamed for

terror attacks within China might have been involved in the disappearance.

"So far there is nothing, no evidence to suggest that they intended to do harm to the plane," said Huang Huikang, China's ambassador to Malaysia.

A Chinese civilian aviation official previously said there was no sign of the plane entering the country's airspace on commercial radar. The government has not said whether this has been confirmed by military radar data.

A group of relatives of Chinese passengers in Beijing said they decided Tuesday to begin a hunger strike to express their anger over the handling of the investigation and the lack of any sign of the plane.



Malaysian acting Transport Minister Hishammuddin Hussein, second from right,

speaks as Malaysian Foreign Minister Anifah Aman, right, Malaysia's Department of Civil Aviation director general Azharuddin Abdul Rahman, second left, and Malaysia Airlines Group Chief Executive Ahmad Jauhari Yahyain listen during a press conference at a hotel in Sepang, Malaysia, Tuesday, March 18, 2014. Checks into the background of all the Chinese nationals on board the missing Malaysian jetliner have uncovered no links to terrorism, the Chinese ambassador in Kuala Lumpur said Tuesday. T (AP Photo/Lai Seng Sin)

The search for the aircraft is among the largest in aviation history.

The U.S. Navy said P-3 and P-8 surveillance aircraft were methodically sweeping over swaths of ocean, known as "mowing the grass," while using radar to detect any debris in the water and high-resolution cameras to snap images.

Australian and Indonesian planes and ships are searching waters to the south of Indonesia's Sumatra Island all the way down to the southern reaches of the Indian Ocean.

Huang said China had begun searching for the plane in its territory, but gave no details. When asked at a Foreign Ministry briefing Tuesday in Beijing what this search involved, ministry spokesman Hong Lei said only that satellites and radar were being used.

China also was sending ships to the Indian Ocean, where they will search 300,000 square kilometers (186,000 square miles) of sea.

The area being covered by the Australians is even bigger —600,000 square kilometers (232,000 square miles)—and will take weeks to search thoroughly, said John Young, manager of Australian Maritime Safety Authority's emergency response division.

"This search will be difficult. The sheer size of the search area poses a huge challenge," Young said. "A needle in a haystack remains a good analogy."

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