

PM: MH370 deliberately flown westward
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Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak reveals that MH370 was deliberately flown in a different direction but stopped short of confirming if the aircraft with 239 people on board was hijacked.

"Despite media reports that the plane was hijacked, I wish to be very clear, we are still investigating all possibilities as what caused MH370 to deviate from its original flight path," he says.

Speaking at a packed press conference this afternoon, he also disclosed that the communication equipment on the Boeing 777 had been turned off.

Najib added that search and rescue would continue, but operation in the South China Sea was suspended.

According to him, attention is now on two locations west of the Malaysian peninsula - one is the northern corridor from the border of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to the northern Thailand border and second is the southern corridor, from Indonesia to the southern Indian Ocean.

He also confirmed that the unidentified aircraft spotted by military radar making a turnback and flying towards the Andaman was MH370.

The confirmation is based on satellite information.

"This new satellite information has significant impact on the nature and scope of the search operation. We are ending our operation in the South China Sea and reassessing our deployment of our assets," he added.

The fate of the Malaysian Airlines Boeing 777 has been shrouded in mystery since it disappeared off Malaysia's east coast less than an hour into a March 8 scheduled flight from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing.

But investigators have increasingly focused on the possibility that it was flown off-course by the one of the pilots or someone else on board with detailed knowledge of how to fly and navigate a large commercial aircraft.

According to *Reuters*, India stepped up its search in two areas at the request of Malaysia - one around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and another further west across the Bay of Bengal - but found no evidence that would indicate that the plane had come down in its waters, the Defence Ministry said.

A senior military official in Port Blair, capital of the archipelago, said Indian aircraft had combed waters stretching up to 550km offshore and overflowed all 572 islands in the chain but "we don't have anything so far".

India's Eastern Naval Command was investigating a separate rectangular 'box' 15km wide by 600km long, some 900 km east of Port Blair, but had found nothing.

Malaysia's said new data showed the last communication between the missing plane and

satellites at 8:11am, almost seven hours after it turned back and crossed the Malay peninsula.

The data did not show whether the plane was still flying or its location at that time, presenting searchers with a daunting array of possible last locations. Seven hours more flying time would likely have taken it to the limit of its fuel load.

"Clearly, the search for MH370 has entered a new phase," said Najib, whose government has come under criticism for its slow release of information surrounding what is one of the most baffling mysteries in aviation history.

About two-thirds of the passengers on board the flight were Chinese, and Beijing has been showing increasing impatience with the speed and co-ordination of the Malaysian search effort.

China today demanded that Malaysia keep providing more thorough and accurate information, and added that it was sending a technical team to Malaysia to help with the investigation.

China's *Xinhua* state news agency said in a commentary that Najib's disclosure of the new details was "painfully belated".

"And due to the absence - or at least lack - of timely authoritative information, massive efforts have been squandered, and numerous rumours have been spawned, repeatedly racking the nerves of the awaiting families," it said.

Foul play suspected

The fate of flight MH370 has been shrouded in mystery since it disappeared off Malaysia's east coast less than an hour into its March 8 scheduled flight from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing.

But investigators have increasingly discounted the possibility of an accident due to the deliberate way it was diverted and had its communications switched off.

Investigative sources told *Reuters* on Friday they believed the plane was following a commonly used navigational route when it was last spotted early on Saturday, northwest of Malaysia.

Their suspicion has hardened that it was flown off-course by the pilot or co-pilot, or someone else with detailed knowledge of how to fly and navigate a large commercial aircraft.

No details have emerged of any passengers or crew with militant links or psychological problems that could explain a motive for sabotaging the flight.

The experienced captain, Zaharie Ahmad Shah, was a flying enthusiast who spent his off days tinkering with a flight simulator of the plane that he had set up at home, current and former co-workers said. Malaysia Airlines officials did not believe he would have sabotaged the flight.

The 27-year-old co-pilot Fariq Abdul Hamid was religious and serious about his career, family and friends said, countering news reports suggesting he was a cockpit Romeo who was reckless on the job.

As the search enters its second week, several governments are using imagery satellites - platforms that take high definition photos - while data from private sector communications satellites is also being examined. China alone says it has deployed 10 satellites.

"The area is enormous. Finding anything rapidly is going to be very difficult," said Marc Pircher,

director of the French space centre in Toulouse. "The area and scale of the task is such that 99 percent of what you are getting are false alarms".

The corridors given by Najib represent a satellite track, which appears as an arc on a map. The plane did not necessarily follow the corridor, but was at some point along its path at the moment the signal was sent.

Officials at Kazakhstan's state air navigation service were not available for comment while in Turkmenistan, state aviation officials referred queries to the Foreign Ministry.

Possibly crashed into Indian Ocean

Earlier, a source familiar with official US assessments of electronic signals sent to geostationary satellites operated by Britain's Inmarsat said it appeared most likely the plane turned south over the Indian Ocean, where it would presumably have run out of fuel and crashed into the sea.

If so, just finding the plane - let alone recovering the "black box" data and cockpit voice recorders that hold the key to the mystery - would be a huge challenge.

The expanse of the Indian Ocean has an average depth of more than 12,000 feet, or 3.5km. That's deeper than the Atlantic, where it took two years to locate wreckage on the seabed from an Air France plane that vanished in 2009 even though floating debris quickly pointed to the crash site.

Any debris would have been widely dispersed by Indian Ocean currents in the week since the plane disappeared.

"We have many radar systems operating in the area, but nothing was picked up," Rear Admiral Sudhir Pillai, Chief of Staff of Andamans and Nicobar Command, told *Reuters*.

"It is possible that the military radars were switched off as we operate on an as-required basis. So perhaps secondary radars were operating which may not have the required range to detect a flight at an altitude of 35,000 feet."

The other interpretation was that the aircraft continued to fly to the northwest and headed over Indian territory.

The source said it was believed unlikely the plane flew for any length of time over India because it has strong air defence and radar coverage and that should have allowed authorities there to see the plane and intercept it.

It is extremely rare for a modern passenger aircraft to disappear once it has reached cruising altitude, as MH370 had.

When that does happen, the debris from a crash is usually found close to its last known position relatively quickly.

In this case, there has been no trace of the plane, nor any sign of wreckage.

The maximum range of the Boeing 777-200ER is 7,725 nautical miles or 14,305km. It is not clear how much fuel the aircraft was carrying though it would have been enough to reach its scheduled destination, Beijing, a flight of five hours and 50 minutes, plus some reserve.

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