

PM goes Down Under to mend bruised image?
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ANALYSIS Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak flew to Australia today to take a first-hand look at the search for the missing Malaysian airliner, amid doubts about his government's ability to lead the massive international operation.

The search for Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 has so far failed to recover any debris or materials related to the Boeing 777-200 that disappeared after takeoff from Kuala Lumpur for Beijing on March 8.

While the trip does not have any logistical bearing on the search, it sends a message to relatives of the 239 people on board the plane that the search is a top priority for Najib.

"He is trying to show that he is concerned about the search and rescue operations because ever since the crisis started he only appeared twice at a press conference.

"The rest of the time it was handled by the minister of transport," said James Chin, a political science professor at Monash University in Malaysia.

Najib first faced the media on March 15 to say that the plane's disappearance was a deliberate act and again on March 24 to say that the aircraft was lost in the Indian Ocean.

Chin said Najib's visit also aimed to show the world that Malaysia is the leader of the search, despite being pilloried in foreign media for allegedly bungling the multinational operation as well as the investigation.

The Wall Street Journal late Monday suggested poor coordination between international authorities led to precious time being lost looking in the wrong part of the Indian Ocean.

It reported that separate investigations by two international teams trying to establish the flight path failed to exchange information until Friday.

Cooperation between the teams then led to a change of search area 1,100 kilometres to the north-east, the report said.

The lack of coordination may have cost the search three days, the newspaper report said.

Malaysia was also criticized for not being forthcoming in providing partners and international experts with information to help in investigating what happened to the flight.

The latest incident was the admission late Monday of the country's Department of Civil Aviation that the last communication made by from the cockpit of the ill-fated plane was "Good night, Malaysian 370" and not "All right, good night," as was earlier told to the media.

Chin said Najib was likely to defend Malaysia's credibility to the world media during his visit to Perth.

"I think there are questions being asked about the competency of the Malaysian government in

dealing with a major international crisis like the loss of the plane, the ability of the Malaysian government to handle big search and rescue operations - those are the issues Najib would likely address," he said.

For political commentator Terence Netto, Najib's trip will not achieve anything or redeem Malaysia's tarnished image.

"The government bungled this operation and it's a shame for ordinary Malaysians like us," he said. "This crisis showed how inefficient our government is."

Others share Netto's disappointment over the way the Malaysian government is handling the crisis.

Saujan Ahmad, an accountant, urged government officials to get their act together and stop issuing statements related to the missing plane that they would later withdraw.

"For every retraction they make, the government's credibility diminishes," he said. "These retractions fuel more suspicions among the relatives of those people on board the missing plane."

Saujan expressed the hope that Najib would eventually take the lead in addressing the crisis, following the example of Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbot, who gives regular press statements.

"Najib has to take charge," he said.

Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang lamented that legislators from both the ruling party and opposition coalition have been kept in the dark about developments related to the search for the plane.

"This (secretive) attitude has to change," he said.

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