

A year on, still no answers on MH370

MalaysiaKini.com

Mar 8, 2015

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It has been a full year since aircraft Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 took off from Kuala Lumpur International Airport and entered the public consciousness, nowhere to be found.

The ill-fated flight disappeared off the radar last March 8, early Saturday morning and today not a single clue or any sign of the plane has surfaced.

As family members of the 239 passengers and crew mourn their loss, many are still struggling to move on, and are left clamouring for answers in what is often described as the biggest mystery in modern aviation.

Recently, a group of 18 next-of-kin the Chinese passengers had even resorted to approaching various government agencies and gate-crashing MCA's Chinese New Year open house in their quest for answers.

"It has been a year full of anxiety and exhaustion. The heart is filled with sorrow and disappointment, and now even hopelessness.

"We don't know who can help us, and we hope more people and experts can support us," said a tearful Kelly Wen, who is among the group, during an interview with Malaysiakini and KiniTV on Wednesday.

An AFP report earlier this month quoted other next-of-kin reporting heart problems, loss of sleep and appetite, stroke and suicidal thoughts among others, following the tragedy.

Where is the plane? What happened? Who is to blame? Why did the Royal Malaysian Air Force allow a stray aircraft fly across Malaysian airspace unhindered?

Never before has a modern jetliner like the Boeing 777-200ER has vanished so completely.

Multiple speculation, zero answers

So far, whether it is conjured through sophisticated mathematical analysis or wild imagination, there is only intense speculation but practically no answers.

Until the plane is found and forensics experts go to work, or until groundbreaking new evidence emerges from the numerous lawsuits still pending in courts around the world, MH370's disappearance would likely remain a complete mystery.

As for Malaysia Airlines (MAS) itself, the national carrier had been unprofitable for a number of years but was hoping that 2014 would be the year it turned its fortunes around.

However with the twin disasters of MH370 and then the downing of MH17 in Ukraine in July, that hope was dashed and the company was delisted from Bursa Malaysia pending a restructuring program under the government's Khazanah Nasional.

Khazanah is injecting up to RM6 billion into MAS, with hopes to return the company to profit by 2017 and later relist it on the stock market to recoup the investment.

Malaysia Airlines' CEO during the crisis, Ahmad Jauhari Yahya, is expected to step down in July this year.

To date, the full cost of the search operations is still unclear, although there are reports speculating that it would far exceed the estimated euro 111 million (RM449 million) record set by the Air France Flight 447 disaster in 2009.

Massive international search in vain

According to a paper tabled by Malaysian delegates at an International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) regional meeting on search and rescue operations in January, a multinational armada of ships and aircraft scoured some five million square kilometres in the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca for signs of the aircraft and those on board, in the first week alone.

This phase involved 64 aircraft and 69 ships from Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Thailand, China, Japan, Australia, India, USA, New Zealand, South Korea, United Arab Emirates, and USA.

In the second week, the rescuers looked further afield to Indonesian waters and the Andaman Sea - 1.63 million square kilometres but to no avail.

New information then emerged that MH370 is most likely in the South Indian Ocean west of Australia, well beyond its maritime borders but still within the area of its search and rescue responsibilities. From then on, Australia took over the lead in the multinational effort.

Over the span of 42 days, according to a paper tabled by Australian representatives at the same ICAO meeting, 28 aircraft clocked a total of 3,177 flight hours, covering 4.7 million square kilometres of open ocean.

The number of vessels used was not specified in the paper, but it included both military vessels, and merchant ships that were passing through the area and roped into the search.

According to a tally by AstroAwani in June last year, the cost incurred by all the countries involved that have been made public add to over RM250 million, with the bulk of it (RM130 million) coming from Australia.

One false lead after another

From Day One of the search, many false leads were turned up, and each added to the aggravation of the next-of-kin.

These included aerial sightings thought to be an oil slick, satellite images thought to be floating debris, and sounds thought to be emanating from an underwater beacon fitted in the aircraft.

Today, only four vessels are still searching in a AU\$120 million (RM342 million) operation jointly funded by Malaysia and Australia.

Each is fitted with some of the most sophisticated deep sea mapping equipment in the world, and is painstakingly mapping a 60,000 square kilometre search area in hopes of uncovering a debris field.

The current phase of the search is scheduled for completion in May, although what happens next if the aircraft is still not found is up for discussion.

The Joint Agency Coordination Centre (JACC), which coordinates the search and recovery effort, provides updates on the search every Wednesday, except during the Christmas holidays in Australia, and this week where the report came on Thursday instead.

“Our work will continue to be thorough and methodical, so sometimes weekly progress may seem slow. Please be assured that work is continuing and is aimed at finding MH370 as quickly as possible,” the agency says in the opening of every report.

In this week’s report, the JACC says it has searched 26,000 square kilometres so far, which is 43 percent of the priority search area. Based reports over the past few weeks, the four vessels are covering approximately 1,000 square kilometres each week.

Much of the content in the reports are as mundane as the preamble suggests, containing information such as ship movements and weather, but little else.

In recent weeks however, the JACC has also published interviews with the ships’ crew talking about their work, their equipment and life at sea in the search.

This week’s report also described how sonar information is classified into three categories based on its likelihood of being MH370’s remains.

However, it adds that the search has so far turned up nothing that is considered to be “of high interest and warrant immediate further investigation”, in other words, nothing on the whereabouts of MH370.

Will lessons be learned?

If there is a silver lining to this story, it is that it has spurred renewed efforts to improve

global flight tracking and ways to ease search and rescue operations.

Some of these proposals, such as underwater beacons with longer battery life and better flight tracking, had been mooted since 2009 following the AF447 disaster, and is part of the official recommendations of French the air accident investigators.

However, these ideas had faltered in the face of airlines balking at the associated costs, and it still remains seen whether current efforts would also stall out.

Nevertheless, a high-level ICAO meeting in February has already endorsed a proposal that would require aircraft in remote areas to report its position every 15 minutes, and every one minute in event of an emergency. Malaysia is a key backer in this initiative.

“Through an expedited process, it will now be sent to our member states before the end of the month for formal comment and we’re anticipating its adoption by council as early as this fall,” ICAO Council president Olumuyiwa Benard Aliu said in a press release on Feb 3.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA), which represents almost all airlines worldwide, has also endorsed the proposal.

Although still a long way off from becoming a mandatory standard, Transport Minister Liow Tiong Lai was quoted in a Bernama report on Friday saying that MAS has already installed the system.

However, the report did not dwell on details such as whether this was for testing or a part of normal operations.

Weaknesses exposed

The MH370 tragedy also highlighted a security weakness that enabled two Iranian asylum seekers to board the aircraft using fraudulent passports.

According to a New Straits Times report last year, that loophole should be closed by July last year by linking passport checking systems at five airports including KLIA to Interpol’s database of stolen passports.

Until the cause of the incident can be determined with certainty however, one could only guess whether present efforts are enough to prevent a recurrence.