

MH370 'awakens' M'sian security

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After a stoush with Interpol over its screening of airline passengers, Malaysia will introduce stricter security checks in the wake of the Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 disaster, reported The Sydney Morning Herald today.

But they will not come into force until June.

It comes as authorities said the FBI had so far found “nothing sinister” after examining the flight simulator that the captain of the missing Malaysia Airlines passenger jet kept in his home.

The high-tech simulator of Captain Zaharie Ahmad Shah has been the subject of intense interest by investigators amid speculation the 53-year-old aviation veteran may have been responsible for the shutdown of communications and dramatic change of course of flight MH370.

Spy agency MI16 as well as the CIA are also helping the Malaysian authorities, which has added to speculation the aircraft was hijacked by terrorists.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced on Sunday that Air Chief Marshal Houston would lead a new joint agency coordination centre based in Perth to commandeer the Australian government's search for MH370.

Stricter checks

When Malaysia was criticised for allowing at least two passengers with stolen passports to board the doomed flight, it said the Interpol check for lost or stolen passports was too time consuming for its immigration guards.

Interpol fired back: the check of its more than 40 million-strong database of stolen and lost passports typically takes 0.2 seconds.

“The fact is that the US consults this database more than 230 million times per year; the UK more than 140 million times; the UAE more than 100 million times and Singapore more than 29 million times. Not one of these countries, or indeed any Interpol member country, has ever stated that the response time is too slow,” it said in a terse statement.

Interpol said Malaysia had not checked even a single time in the past year. Immigration control at Malaysia's airports – as opposed to its land borders – is slack. Agents often do not even check if a visa is still valid.

Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi was reported on Sunday as saying the new system would be introduced soon, starting with Kuala Lumpur's international airports.

“This is one of the new security systems we are putting in place,” he said.

In 2010, Malaysia introduced biometric scans. But it never used them. The capital’s main international airport handles up to 25 million passengers a year. The low-cost terminal, which shares the same runways, handles even more.

In addition to the millions using its airports, millions more cross the land borders with Singapore and Thailand each year.

Deputy head of the immigration department Sakib Kusumi said its computer systems were simply not up to the task, despite millions of dollars being spent on upgrades.

“Our system is not capable for the time being,” he said. “But we will see upgrades in the near future.”

About half a million Australians visit Malaysia each year – making it the ninth most popular destination for Australian travellers.

Website searches for accommodation for Australians in Kuala Lumpur have fallen by a quarter since MH370 disappeared on March 8, with 239 people on board.

Still a remote chance for survivors

Malaysia’s defence minister and acting transport minister says he has not given up hope of finding survivors, no matter how slim the chance.

Hishammuddin met families of the passengers and crew at Malaysia’s seat of government in Putrajaya, just outside Kuala Lumpur.

Although aviation experts say there is no chance of survival, he told them there was still a remote chance.

His comments send mixed messages to families who still hold out hope, but who also need closure.

Relatives of passengers and crew have already begun filing insurance claims against the airline and Boeing and Prime Minister Najib Razak has said the Boeing 777 “ended” in the remote and desolate Indian Ocean off the coast of West Australia.

But an emotional Hishammuddin, visibly choking up, said he still hoped the Australian-led search may bring off a miracle.

“I cannot give them [relatives] false hope,” he said. “The best we can do is pray and be sensitive to them, that as long as there is even a remote chance of a survivor, we will pray and do whatever it takes.

“Miracles do happen, remote or otherwise, and that is the hope that the families want me to convey not only to the Malaysian government, MAS [Malaysia Airlines], but also to the world at large.

“For me, as the minister responsible, this is the hardest part of my life.”

Earlier this week, relatives and friends aboard the plane heard from officials “all lives are lost”.

The Malaysian government has been criticised by angry relatives at home and in China – where more than two-thirds of the passengers on the Kuala Lumpur-Beijing flight came from – for bungling the search operation and hiding details.

“The contradictory and piecemeal information Malaysia Airlines and its government have provided has made search efforts difficult and the entire incident even more mysterious,” the China Daily wrote in an editorial.

“What else is known that has not been shared with the world?”

Boycott of Malaysian goods

Leading Chinese artists have called for a boycott of Malaysian goods.

Chinese relatives have staged protests in Malaysia and walk-outs from Malaysian briefings in Beijing.

“They are still alive, my son and everyone on board!” a 63-year-old Beijing demonstrator said. “The plane is still there too! They are hiding it.”

His son, Wen Yongsheng, was a passenger.

The Chinese government has formally raised concerns with Najib over his country’s handling of the disaster.

Hishammuddin – who was touted as a possible successor to Najib until this crisis – has said Malaysia will be judged as doing everything it could and acting responsibly.

But he also admitted on Friday the focus of the search, already just moved by 1100 km because of new analysis of data that has been known for weeks, is likely to shift again in the next few days.

As Defence Minister, Hishammuddin is also overseeing an air force investigation into why at least three military radar stations failed to detect MH370 immediately after it turned back over the Malaysian peninsula.

Malaysia has set up an international investigation panel to look at how the flight was lost.

Malaysia’s government is under pressure from the opposition to launch a formal inquiry into the handling of MH370, which has led to rowdy scenes in Parliament.

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