

MH370's sudden loss of contact mystifies aviation experts
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The sudden disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 has stumped aviation experts. The abrupt loss of contact with Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 early today has led prominent aviation experts to speculate a catastrophe such as an explosion or lost freight door ended the plane's flight, the Sydney Morning Herald has reported.

Aviation expert and editor of airlineratings.com Geoffrey Thomas told the paper's owner Fairfax Media that he suspected the plane was involved in a "sudden catastrophic explosion" because no mayday call or other warning was made.

The Boeing 777-200 aircraft with 239 onboard lost contact with the Subang air traffic control within two hours of taking off from the Kuala Lumpur International Airport for Beijing. It was a MAS codeshare flight with China Southern Airlines.

Thomas, who has been involved in the aviation industry for 35 years, speculated such an explosion could be caused by either a terrorist bomb or a cargo door ripping away from the craft.

But he pointed out the latter incident had not occurred widely since the 1970s, and had never occurred in the nearly faultless history of the Boeing 777 since the aircraft was launched in 1995.

The Australian daily quoted Thomas as saying the plane has only been involved in one crash – which was ultimately ruled to be "pilot error" – when an Asiana Airlines plane crashed into a runway seawall during a landing at San Francisco International Airport last year. Three people were killed and hundreds injured in the accident.

"The whole industry is shocked. Malaysia Airlines has a great reputation and excellent record with its pilots, and the Boeing 777 is the backbone of the many airline fleets across the globe," he said.

Other aviation commentators are reluctant to point to a cause, stating that a proper investigation is required.

"It's a very capable, impressive and quite luxurious vehicle," Central Queensland University aviation academic Ron Bishop told Fairfax Media.

There are currently 924 Boeing 777s in operation, with the largest fleet (of 87 jets) belonging to Emirates airlines. The aircraft is also used by Virgin.

"These are planes which have been trusted to fly long distances, over millions of hours. Everything is so tracked and measured with these jets, so it's very surprising to hear this news," Professor Bishop said.

"Things like this very, very rarely happen these days – you've got a better chance of winning the lottery."

Thomas also dismissed any concerns the 27-year-old co-pilot may have been lacking the flight experience to operate the vehicle, considering he had 2,700 hours experience, compared with the 18,000-plus hours accumulated by his head pilot.

"Malaysian Airlines co-pilots have always been well-trained and this particular co-pilot has over seven years experience with the airline," Thomas said.

"I do not believe this was pilot or aircraft error," he was quoted as saying in the daily's news portal.

If the aircraft is discovered to have crashed, investigators will aim to recover the aircraft's flight data recorder, which measures engine movements, hydraulics and technical indicators, and the cockpit voice recorder to determine the exact cause of the incident, the paper said.

Professor Bishop noted the incident had occurred amid a significant increase in the number of passengers travelling over recent years.

"The average Australian flies about 2.5 times per year, and this kind of increase is occurring around the world. So it's the same principle as if there were more cars on the road – statistically, there's going to be an increased number of accidents," he said.

Aviation and crisis communication expert Hamish McLean said with over 5,000 planes in the air at any one time, the occasional loss of an aircraft was a rare event, and particularly shocking considering the carrier belonged to a respected and well-known airline.

"There's a lot of uncertainty over what's happened, and the trouble is, all we have is speculation which just adds to the distress for the airline and the relatives of passengers onboard," he said. – March 8, 2014.

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