

Oil slick found between Vietnam and Malaysia 'suspected of being crashed Boeing aircraft'

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A 20km-long oil slick spotted between Malaysia and Vietnam this afternoon may be the first sign that missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 with 239 people aboard went down in the waters between Vietnam and northern Malaysia, according to Vietnam's director of civil aviation.

"An AN26 aircraft of the Vietnam Navy has discovered an oil slick about 20 kilometres in the search area, which is suspected of being a crashed Boeing aircraft – we have announced that information to Singapore and Malaysia and we continue the search," Lai Xuan Thanh, the director of the Civil Aviation Administration of Vietnam, was quoted as saying by The New York Times.

He said he did not know whether the slick was closer to the Malaysian or Vietnam side of the entrance to the Gulf of Thailand.

The report said the last coordinates automatically transmitted by the aircraft were from near the midpoint between the two countries, when the plane appeared to be in stable flight at 35,000 feet.

The discovery came as an international team of rescuers from, among others, Vietnam, Malaysia, China, the United States, Singapore and the Philippines search for the Beijing-bound aircraft which vanished after taking off from Kuala Lumpur International Airport at 12.41am.

Fredrik Lindahl, the chief executive of Flightradar24, an online aircraft tracking service, said that the missing plane, a Boeing 777-200, had been equipped with a transponder that regularly transmitted its position, as calculated from the global positioning system of satellites.

The last recorded position of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 was 150 kilometres northeast of Kuala Terengganu he wrote in an email to The New York Times.

That position is a little less than halfway across the entrance of the Gulf of Thailand from northern Malaysia toward southernmost Vietnam.

"Vietnam has ordered airplanes and military ships to help in the search and rescue," Lai said, adding, "the possibility of an accident is high".

Lt Col Pham Hong Soi, the head of the propaganda department of the Vietnam Navy for the region near the crash site, said that one rescue vessel had already been ordered to sea and two more had been made ready for departure.

China Central Television said that according to Chinese air traffic control officials, the aircraft never entered Chinese airspace.

Malaysia Airlines said that the plane had 227 passengers aboard, including two infants, and an all-Malaysian crew of 12.

The passengers included 154 citizens from China or Taiwan, 38 Malaysians, seven Indonesians, six Australians, five Indians, four French and three Americans, as well as two citizens each from New Zealand, Ukraine and Canada and one each from Russia, Italy, the Netherlands and Austria.

The airline said that it was notifying the next-of-kin of the passengers and crew. Hundreds of family members gathered in rooms set aside for them at a Beijing hotel, and at least two medical personnel went in to monitor them, reported The New York Times.

Boeing said in a statement that it was assembling a team of technical experts to advise the national authorities investigating the disappearance of the aircraft.

The New York Times said in its report that one uncertainty about the flight was when it disappeared from the radar and how quickly the search began in the Gulf of Thailand.

Malaysia Airlines said that the plane took off at 12.41am Malaysia time, and that the plane disappeared from air traffic control radar in Subang, a suburb of Kuala Lumpur, at 2.40am.

That timeline seemed to suggest that the plane stayed in the air for two hours – long enough to fly not only across the Gulf of Thailand but also far north across Vietnam. But Lindahl of Flightradar 24 said that the last radar contact had been at 1.19am, less than 40 minutes after the flight began.

A Malaysia Airlines spokesman said on Saturday evening that the last conversation between the flight crew and air traffic control in Malaysia had been around 1.30am, but he reiterated that the plane had not disappeared from air traffic control systems in Subang until 2.40am.

Arnold Barnett, a long-time Massachusetts Institute of Technology specialist in aviation safety statistics, said that prior to the disappearance of Saturday's flight, Malaysia Airlines had suffered two fatal crashes, in 1977 and 1995.

Based on his estimate that Malaysia Airlines operates roughly 120,000 flights a year, he calculated that the airline's safety record was consistent with other fairly prosperous, middle-income countries but had not yet reached the better safety record of airlines based in the world's richest countries.

The New York Times report said with no new information about the missing plane, China's civil aviation authority urged the Malaysian government to be more forthcoming.

"The Civil Aviation Administration of China has urged the Malaysian civil aviation authority to clarify the situation of flight MH370 as quickly as possible, and to brief the Chinese side as quickly as possible," it quoted a report by the Chinese state-run news agency Xinhua which cited an unnamed Chinese aviation official.

"It also urged Malaysia Airlines to provide active assistance to families of passengers in accordance with the regulations in international civil aviation covenants."

Speaking on the search and rescue efforts, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said: "Our thoughts and prayers are with those who are missing on flight MH370.

"An extensive search and rescue mission is underway. We are grateful for the support in this effort from around the world.

“Fifteen aircraft and nine ships are currently searching for the missing plane. Our priority now is to widen the search area and provide support to relatives of those missing.

“Today, all Malaysians stand in solidarity with those on flight MH370 and their loved ones.” –
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