

MAS says 'fearing the worst' for MH370, working with US disaster recovery firm

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By Lee Shi-lan

The director-general of the Department of Civil Aviation, Datuk Azharuddin Abdul Rahman, was grilled by the international media over two people with stolen passports who are listed on the passenger manifest. Malaysia Airlines says it is "fearing the worst" for flight MH370 and will be working with an American disaster recovery company to locate the missing aircraft.

The airline will also set up a command centre either in Kota Baru, Kelantan, or in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam, as soon as it could establish the location of the missing aircraft, said MAS in its latest statement today.

"The airline is continuously working with the authorities in providing assistance. In fearing for the worst, a disaster recovery management specialist from Atlanta, United States, will be assisting Malaysia Airlines in this crucial time.

"Malaysia Airlines reiterates that it will continue to be transparent in communicating with the general public in all matters affecting MH370," it said.

Malaysia Airlines has also deployed a team of 94 caregivers consisting of trained staff and also Tzu Chi Foundation members to provide emotional support to the families.

The airline would be deploying another set of caregivers to Beijing later today, the statement said.

Last night, a Malaysia Airlines' senior management team arrived in Beijing to address the media and meet with family members. The team also met families of affected passengers in Kuala Lumpur.

Meanwhile, the director-general of the Department of Civil Aviation, Datuk Azharuddin Abdul Rahman, endured an uncomfortable morning today as the international media grilled him on Malaysia's immigration procedures and passengers using stolen passports.

He was updating the media on the current search and rescue operations to locate flight MH370.

However, as soon as the reporters were allowed to ask questions, Azharuddin was bombarded by the international media who wanted to know more about how the names of the Austrian and Italian passengers, whose passports had reportedly been stolen, were on the passenger manifest.

Italian Luigi Maraldi and Austrian Christian Kozel appeared on the passenger manifest list for flight MH370.

However, it was reported that both Maraldi and Kozel are alive but their passports had previously been reported stolen.

The foreign ministries of Austria and Italy had interviewed both Kozel and Maraldi and verified that they were not on the flight.

"We are aware of the stolen passport issue and are carrying out an investigation," Azharuddin said, looking visibly uncomfortable.

Asked whether the Immigration Department had crosschecked the passengers' names against the Interpol database, Azharuddin kept silent.

When pressed by foreign media, Azharuddin replied that they were investigating the case.

He was also asked whether MH370, a Boeing 777-200, was an accident-prone aircraft.

"We are investigating all angles, we have already obtained all the records of the aircraft from Malaysia Airlines," Azharuddin said.

In August 2012, the wingtip on the same MAS Boeing 777-200 broke off as it was taxiing at Pudong International Airport outside Shanghai.

The wingtip collided with the tail of a China Eastern Airlines A340 plane. No one was injured in that incident.

Azharuddin said search and rescue operations resumed today at 7am.

"Despite hours of searching, there are still no concrete sightings of MH370."

Azharuddin added that it had not received any report from the Vietnamese authorities on the 20km oil slick between Malaysia and Vietnam.

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

The 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 Fredrik Lindahl, the chief executive of Flightradar24, an online aircraft tracking service, had said that the last radar contact had been at 1.19am, less than 40 minutes after the flight began.

The authorities said yesterday that the last conversation between the flight crew and air traffic control in Malaysia had been about 1.30am. – March 9, 2014.

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