

## **MH370: Our lesson in crisis management**

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**By Khairie Hisyam**

In all honesty, we have not handled the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 perfectly. But really can anyone? Regardless, Tiger thinks the incident offers invaluable lessons that Malaysians must not miss.

The national tragedy that is MH370's disappearance has turned into a crisis management test for Putrajaya and Malaysia Airlines (MAS). But it has not been an encouraging showing.

In the jungle the apex predator (namely Tiger, thank you very much) has certain expectations to meet when it comes to handling major issues affecting its kingdom like dried-up watering holes, filthy air choking Tiger's food sources to death and brushfires. These expectations include giving clear directions and providing consistent, accurate information.

Most of all, there must be strong leadership that translates into swift action. That has not been evident for the past 11 days since the plane went missing.

There were contradictory statements from the start which caused confusion. Agencies which should be scrambling to share information with each other with all haste appeared to be doing so lethargically. The military's apparent lack of alarm over unidentified aircraft passing through national airspace is alarming.

And as the pilots face trial by media in absentia this week, MAS had not leaped to their defence with vigour. At the very least MAS should have attempted to protect the pilots' good reputation until such a time that they were found guilty of anything.

Tiger does not intend to dwell overly long on the things we did wrong — there are plenty other reports outlining those amid the endless speculation. But Tiger cannot help but be particularly disappointed with how we have managed information as far as the MH370 incident goes.

After MH370 went dark and was announced missing, there should have been an official compilation of confirmed facts that the media can work from and which the public can refer to for factual information, constantly updated as new information materialises or is verified. All speculation must be acknowledged and followed-up on as either true or false, perhaps tagged as unverified in the interim.

There should also have been a single spokesperson to provide updates and take questions. But there was no such factsheet as far as Tiger is aware and no single spokesperson emerged. The result was myriad figures commenting and providing information in different capacities, sometimes contradicting each other.

This lack of proper information management added to the apparent slowness on our part in analysing and cross-checking our own military radar data with secondary radar to affirm where MH370 headed towards after going dark in the Igaru area.

End result: Speculation spread like wildfire and confusion ensued as myriad information came out via press reports much faster than from official sources.

Not to mention that we had sent several neighbours' assets on a wild goose chase in the South China Sea when it appeared that we could have determined the plane's last known location — either one of the two corridors west of the Peninsula — much earlier.

Little wonder then that a narrative of lethargic incompetence had emerged about Malaysia's handling of the crisis, painted by and propagated by foreign media, especially those from China. By all accounts along this vein, Putrajaya, unused to heavy scrutiny, is wilting in the face of international criticism

"The Malaysians deserve to be criticised — their handling of this has been atrocious," said Ernest Bower, a Southeast Asia specialist at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington to Reuters. "They have no maritime domain awareness and it doesn't look like they have a strong command and control structure and they're not well coordinated with friends."

To some extent, Tiger concurs that we have not given our best showing in terms of managing this disaster.

However Tiger thinks there is a runaway train heading towards Bash-Malaysia Station and there needs to be some objectivity in assessing how we performed.

It bears repeating that MH370's disappearance is unprecedented. There had been no directly comparable incident such as this and we are pretty much in uncharted waters.

Couple that with the fact that we have not had much experience with crisis management and there were always going to be slips, confusion and mistakes, especially in the early hours of the crisis.

"Most of the local guys are pretty darned good ... The problem they have is, they don't do it a lot. We do this a lot," Thomas Haueter, a former chief of air safety at the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), told New York Times.

So to Tiger we haven't really dropped the ball, although admittedly we are fumbling. Our slips are inexcusable but certainly understandable in the face of an exceptional crisis. The important thing to pursue now is to push our authorities to do better, not pin blames and nitpick relentlessly.

As an aside, it is also interesting to note that as a narrative took shape saying that Beijing should and need to take control of the situation — which it cannot, since the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) protocols dictate that Malaysia has jurisdiction and must lead efforts — another narrative has been noticeable: that the US is quietly in the driving seat.

The emerging taste in Tiger's mouth is of Malaysia being caught in a subtle contest of influence at a time when all thought should go towards finding the plane.

In any case, above all, this incident should be our lesson in crisis management. Pray we never need to call upon what we learned this time around ever again.

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