

## **Malaysian air jet searchers seek suspected plane piece**

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**By BLOOMBERG**

Vietnamese forces looking for a missing Malaysian Airline System Bhd aircraft said they were searching for a suspected window or door fragment spotted from the air, as efforts to determine the plane's fate extended to scrutiny of security images of two passengers using stolen passports.

The piece is suspected to be part of a plane's emergency door or window, and rough seas and darkness were preventing crews from retrieving it, Le Van Minh, a Vietnamese coast guard commander, said in a phone interview today. Ships are combing the area for the piece, which was spotted yesterday 90 kilometers (56 miles) south of Vietnam's Tho Chu Island.

Helicopters and planes will resume the search for Flight 370, a Boeing Co 777-200 model, which vanished two days ago on a flight to Beijing from Kuala Lumpur with 239 people on board. The prospect of terrorism arose after Austria and Italy said passports used by two male passengers were stolen from their citizens and Malaysia stepped up investigating passengers.

"There's no sign of the aircraft," Azharuddin Abdul Rahman, director-general of Malaysia's Department of Civil Aviation, said yesterday at a news conference. "Although we have confirmed reports of oil spills, that has not been confirmed by the authorities."

### **Oil Slicks**

The airline said it had no concrete information on the plane's whereabouts, the Subang Jaya-based state-run carrier said in an e-mailed statement today. Search and rescue teams assisting include those from Australia, China, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, Philippines and the US, it said.

Shares of Malaysian Air headed for their biggest decline in nine months in Kuala Lumpur trading.

An air search resumed yesterday after Vietnam's military found two oil slicks as long as 15 kilometers off its south coast. Malaysian Air will hold a press conference at noon in Kuala Lumpur.

Dinh Viet Thang, head of Vietnam's search-and-rescue steering committee, said by phone this morning that vessels are still searching and haven't found any objects.

The carrier said yesterday that it feared the worst. The most recent crash of this magnitude was in Feb 19, 2003, when an Iranian Revolutionary Guard plane crashed in the Indian Ocean, killing 275 people, according to the website of Aviation Safety Network.

The website is supported by the US non-profit Flight Safety Foundation in Alexandria, Virginia.

## **Two Tickets**

Interpol said in a statement that at least two passports recorded in its database, one Austrian and one Italian, were used by passengers on the flight after being reported stolen in Thailand. Two people using Italian and Austrian passports on the flight, Luigi Maraldi and Christian Kozel, had consecutive ticket numbers, according to the Chinese e-ticket verification system Travelsky.

Both tickets were issued on March 6, 2014, according to the website of China Southern Airlines Co, which was a code-share on the flight.

All the passengers on the flight to Beijing from Kuala Lumpur are being investigated, with a specific focus on four names, Malaysian acting transport minister Hishammuddin Hussein said separately yesterday without elaborating.

“I’m in touch with the international intelligence agencies” concerning the passports, he said at a briefing.

The airline’s policy states that cockpit doors must be electronically locked and can be opened only from the inside. All of its planes have cameras to identify people outside the cockpit, according to the carrier’s media center.

## **Search Radius**

The search radius was expanded to 50 nautical miles from 20 nautical miles, with ships continuing the effort after dark, Azharuddin said.

A team from the US National Transportation Safety Board was heading to Malaysia to be in place once the wreckage of the plane is located. The team was being joined by experts from the Federal Aviation Administration and Boeing, Kelly Nantel, a spokeswoman, said in an e-mail.

Closed-circuit television footage exists of the two people who used the false passports, Azharuddin said.

“There are only two passengers on record that flew on this aircraft that have false passports,” he said before the press conference. “We have the CCTV recordings of those passengers from check-in right through the departure point. These records of CCTV are now being used for investigation of this matter.”

The aircraft may have made an “air turn-back,” according to Hishammuddin. That means the plane may have deviated from its planned route, said Malaysian Air chief executive officer Ahmad Jauhari Yahya.

## **Wing Damage**

A wing on the plane was damaged after a minor collision with another aircraft previously, and was fully repaired, Ahmad Jauhari said yesterday without specifying when it happened. The plane was repaired by Boeing, cleared by the manufacturer and was safe to fly, he said.

There is no indication of terrorism at this point, said a US official following the case, asking not to be identified because the investigation is still in its early stages. The US is working with authorities in the region to explore all possible causes, the official said.

The Austrian passport used to board the flight belonged to a 30-year-old who reported the theft in 2012 in Thailand, while the Italian was Luigi Maraldi, who disclosed the theft of his documents in August 2013, according to the countries' foreign ministries. Neither man was on the Malaysian aircraft, their governments said.

China Southern said it sold seven tickets on the flight, including to people of Austrian and Italian nationality, according to the company's microblog.

### **Border Control**

When asked about the passengers who boarded with stolen passports, chairman Si Xianmin told reporters in Beijing, "the key is with border control and immigration departments on the ground."

Flight 370 departed the Malaysian capital at about 12:41am local time March 8, 2014 and was scheduled to land in Beijing at 6:30am Security screening was performed as usual at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia Airports Holdings Bhd said.

The twin-engine, wide-body plane carried 227 passengers and 12 crew members, with Chinese travelers accounting for the largest group by nationality at 153, including an infant, the airline said. Also aboard were three US citizens, according to the US State Department. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation is monitoring the situation.

### **Seventh Fleet**

China and the US are assisting efforts, with the destroyer USS Pinckney from the US Navy's Seventh Fleet among vessels in the search. President Barack Obama was briefed while on a weekend family vacation in Key Largo, Florida, said Josh Earnest, a White House spokesman. Chinese president Xi Jinping spoke Obama by phone today about the missing plane, China state broadcaster CCTV reported.

The oil slicks discovered by Vietnamese military aircraft were about 140 kilometers south of Tho Chu Island in a body of water known as the Gulf of Thailand, off the South China Sea.

While Muslim-majority Malaysia hasn't seen any recent major terrorist attacks on home soil, it has been used as a transit and planning hub, according to a 2012 report by the US State Department. China, the plane's destination, has occasionally suffered what it calls terrorist attacks by Uighurs, a mainly Muslim ethnic group from the nation's northwest Xinjiang region.

### **'The Mystery'**

If terrorism was involved, the flight's disappearance over water may not be a coincidence, said John Magaw, a former top US law-enforcement and transportation-security official who now works as a consultant. Magaw, who formerly was director of the US Secret Service and led the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives as well as the Transportation Security Administration, said bringing down an airliner at sea helps obscure any evidence.

US representative Mike Rogers, chairman of the House intelligence committee, said he's seen no indication the U.S. had picked up evidence of a mid-air explosion of the plane. The lack of such evidence "is certainly adding to the mystery," Rogers said yesterday on ABC's "This Week" program.

The presence of two passengers with stolen passports signals possible terrorism, said Magaw, citing intelligence warnings that multiple attackers might seek to elude detection by smuggling different parts of bombs onto planes and then assembling the pieces in restrooms.

### **Passport Scanning**

In the case of Air France Flight 447, which disappeared en route to Paris from Rio de Janeiro on June 1, 2009, Brazilian search teams began finding pieces within a day. The wreckage was discovered 3,900 meters (12,800 feet) deep in the Atlantic Ocean.

Malaysian immigration officers check foreign passports with biometric features by swiping outbound travelers' documents to see details of their histories and compare thumb prints and faces to on-screen photo identifications, said an immigration official at Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

When the Malaysian system isn't working, slows or freezes, officers enter passport details manually without taking thumb prints, said the official, who asked not to be identified because of a lack of authorization to speak publicly.

Information is keyed in manually for passports without biometric enhancements, the official said. Outbound travelers' passports also are checked to ensure that they show stamps proving entry into Malaysia, said the official, who was commenting on procedures in general rather than Flight 370.

### **Internal Investigation**

The stolen Austrian passport had biometric features, said Thomas Weiss, a spokesman for the nation's Foreign Ministry.

Malaysia began an internal investigation of its Immigration Department, the Malaysian National News Agency reported. The inquiry will focus on operations at Kuala Lumpur International Airport, it said.

US officials will work closely with counterparts in China and Malaysia, with a focus on how airport checkpoints worked and whether passengers' shoes were scanned properly for explosives, said Kip Hawley, a former chief of the US Transportation Security Administration who is now a consultant.

Malaysia's last communication with the plane, just before a handoff to Vietnamese authorities, was "normal," according to Azharuddin. Contact was lost a minute before the aircraft entered Vietnam's airspace, its government said on its website.

The plane disappeared from Malaysian radar at 1:30am on March 8, 2014. The carrier said the last radar contact with the plane was about 120 nautical miles east of Kota Bahru, near the South China Sea. FlightAware, a Houston-based compiler of global air-traffic information, gave the jet's last known altitude as 35,000 feet as it flew a northeasterly course at 539 mph.

### **777 Record**

Captain Zaharie Ahmad Shah, 53, and First Officer Fariq Ab. Hamid, 27, were the pilots, according to an airline statement. The captain had 18,365 flying hours and joined the company in 1981, while his first officer had 2,763 hours of flying. The first officer joined the Subang Jaya-based airline in 2007.

The 777 has been involved in only three accidents serious enough to destroy a plane. The only fatalities occurred in last year's Asiana Airlines Inc. crash in San Francisco, where investigators have focused on pilot error.

US representative Peter King, a Republican from New York who is chairman of the House Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, said yesterday that so far no terror link has been found.

"There is a full court press going on" by intelligence and security officials to find out what happened, said King, who was briefed by intelligence officials.

"The two stolen passports have them concerned," King said in an interview. "It happened in Malaysia, where there has been al-Qaeda activity over the years. And the plane just disappeared without a mayday or distress call. All of those are potential terrorist indicators."

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