

MH370 conspiracy theories re-emerge as search sputters

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KUALA LUMPUR: The fruitless MH370 search has breathed new life into conspiracy theories on the plane's fate, with a book, two films and even a former prime minister pushing ideas ranging from diversion by the CIA to an accidental shoot-down.

A host of wild theories including a Taliban hijack or meteor strike had emerged to fill the information vacuum in the days following the plane's disappearance on March 8 with 239 aboard as authorities across Asia scrambled to figure out what happened.

The speculation abated after Malaysia said in late March the plane was believed to have gone down in the Indian Ocean for unknown reasons, but has revived due to the failure of an international search effort to find any trace of the plane.

In a blog posting Sunday, former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad put his weight behind online rumours that the Boeing 777 had a feature allowing the plane's controls to be taken over remotely.

The still-influential Mahathir, 88, said the US Central Intelligence Agency might have taken control of the American-made plane after it was commandeered by terrorists, adding it was possible "the plane is somewhere, maybe without MAS (Malaysia Airlines) markings".

"Can it not be that the pilot of MH370 lost control of their aircraft after someone directly or remotely activated the equipment for seizure of control of the aircraft?" Mahathir wrote.

'Someone is hiding something'

"Someone is hiding something. It is not fair that MAS and Malaysia should take the blame. For some reason the media will not print anything that involves Boeing or the CIA," wrote Mahathir, who is known for his anti-western rhetoric.

Similar allegations were floated previously by a newspaper controlled by Malaysia's ruling party — which was under fire over a perceived bumbling and secretive handling of the crisis.

The suggestion of American involvement was dismissed at the time by the US embassy in Malaysia.

Two films about MH370 were touted Sunday to potential distributors at the Cannes Film Festival in France, with a trailer for one of them — "The Vanishing Act" — showing terrified passengers and a gun being brandished.

The film was pitched as "the untold story of the missing Malaysian plane".

One of the first books about MH370 went on sale Monday, suggesting it could have been shot down during a military drill in the South China Sea and the incident covered-up.

London-based author Nigel Cawthorne said there had been a joint Thai-US military exercise at the time and which was to include live-fire exercises.

“Say a participant accidentally shot down Flight MH370. Such things do happen. The cruiser USS Vincennes shot down Iran Air Flight 655 over the Persian Gulf in 1988,” he wrote.

“No one wants another Lockerbie, so those involved would have every reason to keep quiet about it,” he added, referring to the blowing up of Pan Am flight 103 in 1988 over Lockerbie, Scotland. A Libyan intelligence officer was convicted of that bombing.

Singapore-based aviation analyst Terence Fan said without evidence of the wreckage, “you can’t rule anything out but this is very unlikely”.

Reassessing the search

Malaysia’s government has said satellite data indicates the plane probably diverted to the Indian Ocean and crashed after running out of fuel.

But nothing has been found despite weeks of extensive searches at the surface and on the seabed. Malaysia has said it would review the satellite data and reassess the search, possibly deploy more undersea search assets.

Malaysia has announced no findings from various investigations into what caused MH370’s disappearance.

Surveys have suggested most Malaysians suspect the corruption-prone government is hiding something, while one in 10 Americans believe “space aliens, time travellers or beings from another dimension” were involved, according to an earlier CNN poll.

Leading theories being probed by investigators include a possible hijacking, rogue pilot action or mechanical failure.

Pilot Zaharie Ahmad Shah, 53, came under scrutiny amid unsubstantiated reports that he was upset over a jail sentence handed to Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim hours before the plane took off or was suicidal due to personal problems.

But his brother-in-law Asuad Khan, in an interview Monday with Australian Broadcasting Corporation, denied Zaharie suffered any emotional problems and suggested he was being used as a scapegoat.

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