

As MH370 search deadline looms, Malaysia to consult experts on next move

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By Eileen Ng

Malaysia will let the experts decide on the next course of action if the current search for missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 in the southern Indian Ocean fails to yield any sign of the wreckage, said Transport Minister Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai.

The current search in this remote area is expected to end in May, according to the Joint Agency Coordination Centre (JACC) in Australia which coordinates information related to the search.

And although Malaysia has lead investigative responsibility to find the cause of the plane's disappearance and where it was now, Liow said the next steps would have to be decided together with experts and other countries involved in the search.

"We will leave it to the world experts to decide what will happen next. We have to rely on them," Liow told The Malaysian Insider ahead of the first anniversary of the plane's disappearance on March 8 while flying from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing.

There were 239 people on board. He said the current search zone of 60,000 sq km was determined by a team of experts from around the world, based on data from Inmarsat and air traffic control.

Malaysia, he said, could not solely decide on the matter.

"The search zone is determined by a team of world experts and not determined by Malaysia. We have to rely on these experts," Liow said.

At the initial stages of the search, eight countries were involved in scouring the ocean for visual signs of the plane's wreckage.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak had announced on March 24 last year that flight MH370 had ended in a secluded spot in the southern Indian Ocean.

But the search moved to an undersea phase on April 28, after Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced that it was highly unlikely that any aircraft debris remained on the ocean surface.

Malaysia, China and Australia are currently involved in the undersea search for the ill-fated jetliner.

On January 29 this year, the Malaysian Department of Civil Aviation announced that the plane was lost in an accident and all on board presumed dead.

But it stressed that the search would continue.

Asked what Malaysia had learnt from the tragedy, Liow said the aviation industry as a whole now had greater awareness about the need to upgrade safety standards and to develop stronger cooperation between countries.

"Not only Malaysia learned something from this but world aviation safety needs more cooperation and collaboration among countries," he said.

The spotlight is now on safety, with the United Nations' International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) responding warmly to Malaysia's proposal for a real-time tracking for commercial airliners, he added.

Following the proposal, he said, the aviation body had set up a committee to look into the issue.

"The tragedy gave us the awareness that we need to continually upgrade our safety standards and work with international experts.

"The world needs to view this seriously and we need more cooperation between countries."

Last week, Australia announced that together with Malaysia and Indonesia, it would test a "world first" system that increases the tracking of an aircraft over remote oceans to a minimum rate of every 15 minutes from current intervals of 30 to 40 minutes.

Liow also said to "wait for the outcome of the investigation's report" when asked if any Malaysian officials had been held responsible for the plane's disappearance.

There was confusion in the early days of the search following MH370's disappearance when it was only revealed days after March 8 that military radar had spotted the plane making an air-turn back across the peninsula and around Penang, but did not scramble jets to investigate.

The current search, led by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau, has covered more than 26,000 sq km of the sea floor, which is more than 40% of the total search area. It has four ships using state-of-the-art sonar system to look for the wreckage under the sea.

The intensive underwater hunt in depths of up to 6,000m has so far turned up just a few shipping containers – but no sign of the jet.

The May 2015 deadline to complete the current search is based on the assumption that there will be no significant delays with vessels, equipment or due to the weather.

The search is jointly funded by Australia and Malaysia, with some A\$120 million (RM340 million) pledged so far.

Yesterday, Australia's Abbott said the search had been a "harrowing 12 months of uncertainty and sorrow", and conceded that it could not go on "forever" at its current intensity.

"I can't promise that the search will go on at this intensity forever, but we will continue our very best efforts to resolve this mystery and provide some answers," he was quoted as saying by The Australian. – March 6, 2015.

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