

Malaysian authorities taken to task by aviation experts for fuelling speculation

Lawyer whose firm represented relatives of SilkAir 1997 crash victims says he is suspicious of speculation about MH370

-
- Matthew Weaver
 - theguardian.com, Tuesday 11 March 2014 14.50 EDT
-



Malaysia's minister of defence Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein, centre, with civil aviation chief Azharuddin Abdul Rahman, left, and Malaysia Airlines group chief executive Ahmad Jauhari Yahyain, right. Photograph: EyeExpress/Sipa/Rex

Aviation experts have criticised the way Malaysian authorities have fuelled what is likely to be misleading speculation about what caused flight MH370 to go missing.

Steve Marks, a lawyer at the US firm Podhurst Orseck, which represented relatives of victims of a SilkAir crash in Asia in 1997 and the Air France crash in 2009, said he was suspicious of information being released by Malaysia.

On Tuesday Malaysian investigators said they were still looking at a range of theories including hijacking and possible sabotage by a passenger or crew member.

Marks said: "In my opinion terrorism and pilot suicide are very remote and farfetched. It can't be ruled out 100% but it certainly shouldn't be the focus. That kind of speculation without proof is very damaging and hurtful to the families."

Marks thinks the most likely explanation for the plane's disappearance was a sudden technical failure.

"It is not uncommon in plane crashes over water to have a very extended search," he said.

"What is so mysterious here is the complete absence of any information, which to me tends to support a complete catastrophic failure at altitude. If the aircraft had come under control it would have been picked up by some radar, or some radio communication.

"The complete absence of any information suggests there was a big failure and it was very sudden."

A Malaysian military source told Reuters that the Beijing-bound plane changed course and was detected over the Malacca Strait at a lower altitude, several hundred miles from where it lost contact with air traffic control.

Commenting on the report, Marks said: "I want to know the basis for those claims. If they were visible observations they are not going to be reliable, especially at higher altitudes. For them to positively identify that the aircraft came over the Malacca Strait the transponder would have to have been working.

"If there was power to the transponder there would have been power to the radio. In that event why would the pilot not have communicated a problem? There's a lot of questions about that claim."

Marks cautioned that it was difficult for the investigators to be genuinely independent because they needed to rely on the information supplied by the makers of the plane - Boeing.

He said: "The investigators don't have the resources to understand the aircraft well enough to investigate it independently, so they involve the manufacturers, which is a real problem in the process."

David Learmount, operations and safety editor at Flightglobal, said Malaysian investigators should be more transparent.

"The Malaysia authorities are likely to have a lot more information than they are sharing with us," he said. "I think the Malaysia military know a lot more about the position of the aircraft than has come out. But the military don't appear to be in charge of the search. The problem is that the various government agencies are not communicating effectively."

He asked: "If they have military tracking information why are they still looking both sides of the [Malaysia] peninsula?"

He added: "It's impossible to deduce what happened. If a pilot changes the course of an aircraft he usually tells air traffic control straight away."

Writing on his blog, Learmount added: "There are so many information sources that do not appear to have been used effectively in this case. As a result the families of the missing passengers and crew are being kept in the dark, and the search areas now extended to both sides of the peninsula have become so wide that it is clear that tracking information on the aircraft has not been used effectively.

"There is an all-pervasive sense of a chaotic lack of coordination between the Malaysian agencies which has hindered the establishment of an effective search strategy."