

Iranian traveling on stolen passport was seeking asylum

By [Chico Harlan](#), [William Wan](#) and [Simon Denyer](#), Updated: Tuesday, March 11, 8:01 AM

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — Malaysian and international police officials played down the likelihood of terrorism in the disappearance of a Malaysian Airlines jet, but released the names of two Iranians who traveled aboard the plane using stolen passports.



Interpol chief Ronald Noble and Malaysia's Inspector General of Police Khalid Abu Bakar said in separate news conferences that the two Iranian men did not appear to have any terrorist links, despite earlier speculation prompted by their use of the stolen travel documents.

Investigators identified the two men as 19-year-old Pouria Nour Mohammad Mehrdad and Delavar Seyed Mohammad Reza, 29. They said Mehrdad was trying to seek asylum in Germany. When he did not arrive as planned, his mother contacted Malaysian authorities and helped identify him.

Speaking to journalists in Kuala Lumpur, Khalid, speaking specifically of Mehrdad, said "we believe he is not likely to be a member of any terrorist group." Reza's presence on the plane was still being investigated, but in his news conference Noble discounted the likelihood of terrorism as the cause of the plane's disappearance.

As the investigation stretched into its fourth day, Khalid said investigators are now concentrating on four main possible causes for the plane's disappearance: hijacking, sabotage, and psychological and personal problems among passengers and crew.

Chinese public security officials visited Malaysian police Tuesday morning and delivered photos and profiles of all 153 Chinese on board, he said. Malaysian investigators are now going through all the photos and profiles of the passengers for new leads.

Other governments have told the Malaysian government they had no prior knowledge of any terrorism, Khalid said.

While Malaysian officials said Monday that they removed the baggage of five passengers who checked in but did not board the airplane, on Tuesday they reversed themselves saying that everyone who checked in for the

flight boarded the plane and there were no passengers who booked the flight and did not board. “Everybody that booked the flight boarded the plane,” Khalid said.

Asked for more details on how personal problems might be relevant, Khalid threw out a hypothetical situation that perhaps someone could have taken out substantial life insurance or owed a lot of money.

Khalid rebutted criticism, including a recent scathing statement by Interpol, that Malaysian authorities did not run the stolen passports against Interpol’s database.

“There are 14,226,140 reports of stolen passports in the database, so we have to work by intelligence,” he said. “We didn’t have any prior intelligence on the possibilities of terrorism so the two stolen passports were not supplied to the immigration department.”

Meanwhile, authorities have expanded the search to an area in the hundreds of miles, intensifying an already complicated effort with least 40 vessels and 34 aircraft from 10 countries.

The Reuters news agency quoted an unnamed military source in the country as saying that the plane apparently changed its planned northeasterly course towards China, and flew west for an hour or more after air traffic officials had lost contact with it.

The search area has been expanded into the Adaman Sea, off Malaysia’s west coast.

Searchers are contending with wind and currents as the hunt enters its fourth day. And early prospects of spotted debris or clues have repeatedly turned out to be dead-ends, leaving investigators flummoxed.

“This unprecedented missing aircraft mystery — as you can put it — it is mystifying,” Azharuddin Abdul Rahman, director general of Malaysia’s Department of Civil Aviation, said at a news conference Monday in Kuala Lumpur.

“Search and rescue is a painstaking, long, effort,” said Michel Merluzeau, a managing partner at aerospace consultancy G2. “You have to move methodically. It is perhaps harder with the integration of multiple assets from multiple nations, with very different concept of operations and very different capabilities.”

The U.S. Navy dispatched a second ship Monday to assist an emergency operation in the Gulf of Thailand and South China Sea. But as in the previous two days of searching, no wreckage from Malaysia Airlines Flight

MH370 appeared.

China, which has expressed mounting frustration with the Malaysia-led investigation, said Monday night on its Defense Ministry Web site that it has deployed 10 satellites to help in the search, purging them of their original commands.

The Malaysian government said search areas had been significantly expanded to include a larger square of the Gulf of Thailand and, to the west, a swath that reached farther north, toward the Andaman Sea.

For the plane to have reached the Andaman Sea it would have had to cross the Malaysian peninsula without being detected by ground radar; implying a major failure in Malaysia's air traffic controls. It would also imply the plane had been hijacked, or driven way off course by a possibly suicidal pilot.

In Thailand, officials interviewed travel agents in the beach resort of Pattaya, where tickets were apparently issued for the two men who later boarded the flight with stolen passports, according to the Associated Press. The two men's fake identities had raised the possibility that a terrorist attack brought down the Boeing 777, which was carrying 227 passengers from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing when it vanished Saturday.

But U.S. and other officials say they have found no evidence of terrorist involvement.

Senior American officials dismissed reports that a group called the Chinese Martyrs' Brigade had asserted responsibility for the plane's disappearance. "No group by that name has been previously identified, and it is not clear who is behind the claim," said a U.S. intelligence official who was not authorized to be quoted by name.

Numerous scenarios

In a vacuum of evidence about what went wrong aboard the flight, speculation turned to the possibility of pilot suicide, an extraordinarily rare occurrence.

"You have to ask the question," said a U.S. aviation official who was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

The Malaysia Airlines flight reportedly was being tracked by radar when its transponder went dark. There were no radio transmissions to indicate that anything was amiss aboard the plane. The transponder signals and

radio communication are controlled by the pilot.

There have been two cases in recent years in which a pilot or crew member is believed to have intentionally caused a plane to crash: the disaster involving [SilkAir Flight 185](#), which spiraled into the ground in Indonesia in 1997, killing 97 passengers and seven crew members; and the crash of [EgyptAir Flight 990](#), which plunged into the Atlantic south of Nantucket in 1999, killing 217 people.

But Steve Marks, a Miami aviation lawyer who represented families in two instances in which an airliner plummeted from cruising altitude, pointed to a mechanical failure as the most likely cause of the Malaysia tragedy.

“There can be a mechanical problem that can occur at altitude, where the pilots are unable to report the failure and the aircraft is lost on radar,” he said.

Nonetheless, he said, the failure of all communications from the Malaysia Air flight made it “the most mysterious” crash in his recollection.

A ‘creeping line’

On Monday, the USS Kidd joined the USS Pinckney in surveying the area where the plane is presumed to have crashed, officials said. The ships and their Seahawk helicopters were searching in a zigzag pattern known as a “creeping line,” Navy officials said.

“Just from the air, we can see things as small as almost the size of your hand or a basketball. It’s not a matter of if we can see it. It’s an extremely large area,” a spokesman for the U.S. Navy’s 7th Fleet, Cmdr. William Marks, said in an interview with the BBC.

On Monday, hopes briefly centered on a rectangular orange object that authorities said might have been a life raft. But when a Vietnamese helicopter recovered the piece of flotsam, it was identified as “a moss-covered cap of a cable reel,” the Civil Aviation Authority of Vietnam said on its Web site.

It was not the first time hopes have been dashed in the search.

Late Sunday, Vietnamese authorities said one of their aircraft had spotted a rectangular object that could have been an inner door from the plane. By Monday, ships and planes could not locate the object. Meanwhile,

sightings of what had resembled a piece of the plane's tail turned out to be logs tied together, Malaysian authorities said.

Two oil slicks, between six and nine miles long, consistent with fuel left by a downed jetliner, were tested and found to not be connected to the plane.

In Thailand, police Lt. Col. Ratchthapong Tia-sood said an Iranian man known only as "Mr. Ali" had contacted the Grand Horizon travel agency in Pattaya to book flight tickets for the two men using stolen passports, according to the AP. Grand Horizon asked another agency in the resort town to issue the one-way tickets, the AP reported.

"We have to look further into this Mr. Ali's identity, because it's almost a tradition to use an alias when doing business around here," the police officer told the AP.

The FBI has offered to send forensic help and experts, but the countries leading the investigation have declined, a U.S. law enforcement official said Monday.

The men were using passports stolen in Thailand in 2012 that belonged to Luigi Maraldi, 37, of Italy and Christian Kozel, 30, of Austria.

For many relatives of the passengers, who have grown increasingly angry awaiting news at a Beijing hotel, the conversation Tuesday centered on "consolation money" that they said Malaysia Airlines had begun offering. Some relatives left for Kuala Lumpur Tuesday morning on rushed passports and visas that had been arranged by the Chinese and Malaysian government.

Reflecting the anger and suspicion among many, one relative said that the airline had offered \$5,000 but that he was hesitant to take it because he could not read the entire agreement, which was written in English.

"Until I can read it word for word in Chinese, I won't sign anything," he said. "They may use it shake off all responsibility."

Denyer reported from Beijing. Ashley Halsey, Ernesto Londoño and Adam Taylor in Washington, and Liu Liu, Gu Jinglu and Xu Jing in Beijing contributed to this report.