

For Malaysia Airlines, disaster strikes twice

By Chris Brummitt
The Associated Press

HANOI, Vietnam — Two Boeing 777s. Two incredibly rare aviation disasters. And one airline.

In what appears to be a mind-boggling coincidence, Malaysia is reeling from the second tragedy to hit its national airline in less than five months.

On March 8, a Malaysia Airlines jetliner vanished about an hour after taking off from Kuala Lumpur, spawning an international mystery that remains unsolved. Last Thursday, the airline — and the nation — were pitched into another crisis after the same type of aircraft was reported shot down over Ukraine.

Ukraine said the plane was brought down by a missile over the violence-wracked eastern part of the country. Details are beginning to emerge.

But what's certain is that the struggling airline and the nation must now prepare for another agonizing encounter with grief, recriminations, international scrutiny, and intense legal and diplomatic implications.

Amid it all, a question: Just how could disaster strike the airline twice in such a short space of time?

"Either one of these events has an unbelievably low probability," said John Cox, president and CEO of Safety Operating Systems and a former airline pilot and accident investigator. "To have two in a just a few months of each other is certainly unprecedented."

The first disaster deeply scarred Malaysia and left the world dumbstruck. How could a Boeing 777-200ER, a modern jumbo jet, simply disappear? Flight 370 had veered off course during a flight to Beijing and is believed to have crashed in the Indian Ocean far off the western Australian coast.

The search area has changed several times, but no sign of the aircraft, or the 239 people aboard, has been found. Until then, how the plane got there is likely to remain a mystery.

Last Thursday, there was no mystery over the whereabouts of the Boeing 777-200ER, which went down while on a flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur with 283 passengers and 15 crew members. Its wreckage was found in Ukraine, and there were no survivors.

Officials said the plane was shot down at

an altitude of 33,000 feet. The region has seen severe fighting between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russia separatists in recent days.

Malaysia Airlines was widely criticized for the way it handled the Flight 370 hunt and investigation. Some relatives of those on board accused the airline of engaging in a cover-up, and there have been persistent conspiracy theories over the fate of the plane, including that it might have been shot down.

There was no immediate reason to think the two disasters to befall the airline were in any way linked.

Cox said that to his knowledge, there was no prohibition against flying over eastern Ukraine despite the fighting on the ground. He said that if the plane was shot down by a missile, the pilot probably did not even know it.

"A missile like this typically closes in from behind, there is no reason for him to have seen it," he said.

"Given the military conflict in the region, one has to be concerned that identities could have been mistaken," Charles Oman, a lecturer at the department of aeronautics and astronautics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said in an e-mail.

Malaysia Airlines was especially criticized for the way it handled the communications around the missing jetliner, which presented unique challenges because of the uncertainty facing the relatives of those on board. With the plane crashing over land and its wreckage already located, there will be no such uncertainty.

But the investigation will be just as sensitive. There will be legal and diplomatic implications depending on who was responsible.

"The airline and the Malaysian transport ministry took a lot of hits for the way they handled MH370, due to their inexperience," Oman said. "Hopefully they will do better this time."

The accident will surely inflict more financial damage on Malaysia Airlines. Even before the March disaster, it reported losses because of stiff competition from budget airlines. Afterward, passengers cancelled flights, and even though the airline is insured, it faces uncertainty over payouts to the victims' families.

Chris Brummitt is AP's Southeast Asia news editor and directed the coverage of the Flight 370 disaster from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.



DOUBLE DISASTER. A woman reacts after hearing about the Malaysia Airlines passenger plane that crashed in eastern Ukraine, at Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang, Malaysia. Ukraine said the plane was brought down by a missile over the violence-wracked eastern part of the country. It was flying from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. (AP Photo/Joshua Paul)

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Pope's visit seen encouraging Catholics in Asia

MANILA, The Philippines (AP) — Manila's archbishop says Asia has a special spot in the heart of Pope Francis, who looks forward to visiting the region to encourage Christians, especially those suffering or being persecuted.

Catholics have long been a minority in Asia, with the Philippines the most notable exception. But the Vatican sees Asia as a place for strong growth for the Catholic church. Pope Francis will travel to South Korea in August to beatify 124 Korean martyrs. In January, he is scheduled to visit the Philippines and Sri Lanka.

Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle said that as a young Jesuit, Pope Francis had an unfulfilled wish to be a



PAPAL ENCOURAGEMENT. Pope Francis celebrates the Angelus noon prayer from his studio window at the Vatican overlooking St. Peter's square. Manila's archbishop says Asia has a special spot in the heart of Pope Francis, who looks forward to visiting the region. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)

missionary in Japan. he wanted to visit and encourage Christians in Asia. Shortly after being elected as pope, he told Tagle that

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