



PERPLEXING PLANE. A member of the Indonesian National Search and Rescue Agency (BASARNAS) uses binoculars to scan the horizon during a search operation for the missing Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777 conducted on the waters of the Strait of Malacca off Sumatra island, Indonesia. The Malaysian passenger jet missing since March 8 had its communications deliberately disabled, according to Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak. The plane's last signal came about seven-and-a-half hours after takeoff, meaning it could have ended up as far as Kazakhstan or deep in the southern Indian Ocean. (AP Photo/Heri Juanda)

How can a jet disappear? In the ocean, it's not hard

By Eileen Ng, Kristen Gelineau, and Scott Mayerowitz
The Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — In an age when people assume that any bit of information is just a click away, the thought that a jetliner could simply disappear over the ocean is staggering. But Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 is hardly the first reminder of how big the seas are, and of how agonizing it can be to try to find something lost in them.

It took two years to find the main wreckage of an Air France jet that plunged into the Atlantic Ocean in 2009. Closer to the area between Malaysia and Vietnam where flight 370 vanished, it took a week for debris from an Indonesian jet to be spotted in 2007. Today, the mostly intact fuselage still sits on the bottom of the ocean.

"The world is a big place," said Michael Smart, professor of aerospace engineering at the University of Queensland in Australia. "If it happens to come down in the middle of the ocean and it's not near a shipping lane or something, who knows how long it could take them to find?"

Aviation experts say the plane will be found — eventually. Since the start of the jet age in 1958, only a handful of jets have gone missing and not been found.

"I'm absolutely confident that we will find this airplane," Capt. John M. Cox, who spent 25 years flying for US Airways and is now CEO of Safety Operating Systems, said. The modern pace of communications, where GPS features in our cars and smartphones tell us our location at any given moment, has set unreal expectations.

At press time, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak said the missing pas-

senger jet had its communications deliberately disabled and its last signal came about seven-and-a-half hours after takeoff, meaning it could have ended up as far as Kazakhstan or deep in the southern Indian Ocean.

Some aviation experts are already calling for airlines to update their cockpit technology to provide a constant stream of data — via satellites — back to the ground. Information about key system operations is already recorded on the flight data and voice recorders — the so-called black boxes — but it is not available until the plane is found. Such satellite uplinks would be costly and the benefit is debated.

Just about every major jet to disappear in the modern era has eventually been found. The rare exceptions didn't involve passengers.

In September 1990, a Boeing 727 owned by Faucett Airlines of Peru was ditched into the North Atlantic after running out of fuel on its way to Miami. The accident was attributed to poor pilot planning and the wreck was never recovered.

More mysterious was the disappearance of another 727 in Africa. It was being used to transport diesel fuel to diamond mines. The owners had numerous financial problems and one day, just before sunset, the plane took off without clearance and with its transponder turned off. It is believed to have crashed in the Atlantic Ocean. One theory, never proven, is that it was stolen so the owner could collect insurance.

A week after an Adam Air flight carrying 102 people vanished over Indonesian waters on January 1, 2007, an Indonesian navy ship detected metal on the ocean floor. But it would take another two weeks

Continued on page 7

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