

Search area for Flight 370 to be doubled if plane not found

By Eileen Ng
The Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — The search area for the missing Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 will be expanded by another 60,000 square kilometers (23,000 square miles) in the Indian Ocean if the jetliner is not found by May, according to officials, affirming their commitment to not give up until it is located.

Malaysian Transport minister Liow Tiong Lai said Malaysia, Australia, and China, which are leading the hunt for the Boeing 777 that went missing on March 8 last year, are “committed to the search.”

He told reporters after meeting with his counterparts from the other two countries that so far 61 percent of the 23,000-square-mile search area has been scoured off Australia’s west coast. The remaining 39 percent should be searched by the end of May, he said.

“If the aircraft is not found within the 60,000 square kilometers, we have collectively decided to extend the search to another 60,000 square kilometers within the highest probability area,” he said. However, searchers are hopeful that they can find the plane in the current search area, he said.

The announcement removes some ambiguity about the future of the search as it was never made clear what would happen if the plane is not found. It will also come as a solace to the relatives of the victims, who are holding out the hope of recovering the bodies.

Liow said the two areas together would cover 95 percent of the Indian Ocean flight path of the plane, which went missing while on a flight from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing with 239 people on board. Most of the passengers were Chinese. It dropped off the radar, and investigators using satellite data later figured out that it made a series of turns and headed in a completely opposite direction from where it was going before crashing into the Indian Ocean.

“We are confident we are searching in the right area,” Australian deputy prime minister and transport minister Warren Truss said at the news conference, alongside Liow. “We are confident we have the best search equipment ... if the plane is in the area, we will find it.”

In the first phase, a total of 120 million Australian dollars (\$93.6 million) was spent by Australia and Malaysia, split equally, and Liow said the next phase is estimated to cost A\$50 million (\$39 million).

“Australia and Malaysia have been sharing the cost and we will continue to do that,” Truss said. “We are confident we will be able to fund whatever is necessary.”

The lower cost is because the equipment has already been purchased.

The two ministers said they expect the second phase to take the rest of this year. But it is likely to be hindered by bad weather as winter sets in soon in the southern hemisphere, where seasons are opposite that of the northern hemisphere.

A statement issued after the meeting said the ministers also agreed on plans for recovery activities, including securing evidence, in the event the aircraft is found, but gave no details.

In late January this year, Malaysia’s government formally declared the plane’s disappearance an accident

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First robot into Fukushima reactor stalls, but gets some data

By Mari Yamaguchi
The Associated Press

TOKYO — The operator of the wrecked Fukushima nuclear plant said the first robot sent inside one of the melted reactors stalled before finishing its work, but collected data that indicates a path to send robots deeper into the reactor is intact.

That means a future robot mission may finally reveal the residue of the melted fuel for the first time since the 2011 disaster.

The Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO) said the robot stalled after completing two-thirds of a planned mission inside the Unit 1 containment vessel.

TEPCO spokesman Teruaki Kobayashi said the robot sufficiently collected temperature, radiation levels, and images from parts of the platform just below the reactor core’s bottom by the time it got stuck and became unrecoverable.

Kobayashi said the test also showed the robot tolerated radiation and that the radiation levels were significantly lower than anticipated. That means robots can last longer and some wireless devices may even be usable, even though the radiation levels were way too high for humans to enter the area, even wearing protective gear.

The data will be used to improve future damage assessments, which are crucial to the safe decommissioning of

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AVIATION’S BIGGEST MYSTERY. *Madam Wong of Malaysia holds a message and a photo of her son, Tan Chong Ling, who was a passenger on board the ill-fated Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, during a remembrance event at a mall outside Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in this March 8, 2015 file photo. The search area for the missing jetliner will be expanded by another 60,000 square kilometers (23,000 square miles) in the Indian Ocean if the plane is not found by May, according to officials. The message reads, “Malaysian Airlines and government please get my son back.” (AP Photo/Vincent Thian)*

of the locator beacon for the plane’s data recorder had expired more than a year before the jet vanished.

That still does not explain what caused the plane to veer so off course in what has become aviation’s biggest mystery that continues to confound experts and investigators alike. At the same time, the relatives of the dead have no closure and many still believe their loved ones may be alive amid a host of conspiracy theories including one that the plane was hijacked and landed somewhere safely.

One theory also has the plane flying west to Maldives. Truss said the plane may have had enough fuel to reach Maldives, but it would have been impossible for it to be in the reported area in daylight and not be seen by anyone. Also, the flight path to Maldives would be inconsistent with satellite and radar data. “It is not considered a likely possibility,” he said.

China’s transport minister Yang Chuantang said China may contribute vessels and other assets in the next search phase.

“We will marshal some physical assets including vessels to participate in the search,” he said. “We will not waver in our commitment to continue the search until we find the plane and resolve the mystery.”

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