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NEW STRAITS TIMES

Our deepest condolences to the families of passengers and crew of flight MH370

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MH370 probe team may be forced to 'start again'

By TASNIM LOKMAN

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KUALA LUMPUR: Members of the International Investigation Team (IIT) who have been putting their heads together since day one to find Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 are now looking at the likelihood of starting from scratch in hopes of finally solving this unprecedented aviation mystery.

Sources within the team that is based in Kuala Lumpur told the New Straits Times that among areas they were revisiting was the possibility that the Boeing jetliner had landed somewhere else, instead of ending up in the southern Indian Ocean.

"We may have to regroup soon to look into this possibility if no positive results come back in the next few days ... but at the same time, the search mission in the Indian Ocean must go on.

"The thought of it landing somewhere else is not impossible, as we have not found a single debris that could be linked to MH370.

"However, the possibility of a specific country hiding the plane when more than 20 nations are searching for it, seems absurd," the sources said, adding that one possibility was that the flight had crashed landed in a remote location.

The sources admitted that it was difficult to determine if the plane had really ended in the Indian Ocean, though calculations carried out pointed to the direction.

They pointed out that the Malaysian-led investigation team, together with experts from Inmarsat and the United Kingdom's Air Accidents Investigation Branch, had to rely on a communications satellite (Inmarsat), which did not provide any definite details, including the plane's direction,

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altitude and speed.

"A communications satellite is meant for communication... the name is self-explanatory. The reason investigators were forced to adopt a new algorithm to calculate the last known location of MH370 was because there was no global positioning system following the aircraft as the transponder went off 45 minutes into the flight," one of the sources said.

The IIT, he added, was also looking at adding more assets to be deployed to the existing search area in the Indian Ocean, as well as widening the search area as they feared that the search team had been "looking for the plane in the wrong place".

"We can't focus on one place too long as the ocean is very big although the search team has been following the leads received and analysed.

"It is by luck if we find the wreckage using the Bluefin-21... there is no physical evidence and we are totally depending on scientific calculations since day one, including the pings."

The search for MH370 is now into its 45th day.

Another high-level member of the investigation team said Malaysian authorities were hoping for more countries to come forward and share crucial satellite and radar data that may reveal some potentially relevant information.

The source told the New Straits Times that if these countries had new insight or crucial data and were willing to share it, the assistance would be much welcomed and appreciated.

This comes to light as the NST understands that the investigation team is not getting 100 per cent of the requested information that may play a big role in search operations.

"Malaysian authorities have received data and information from relevant agencies and countries. However, it is not everything.

"(We) have mainly been provided with selective data... though a Malaysian-led team has received raw data from Inmarsat and has been given the right to analyse it... in the end, it depends on what we are asking them for," said the source.

He said Malaysian authorities had to trust these countries as, since we depended highly on the information provided, it was a form of a "favour". He added that since this information potentially involved the national security of the country from which it was requested, there were times when only partial raw data had been provided, making it difficult for Malaysian authorities to get the full picture.

In such cases, the investigation team had to rely on information provided through discussions with the foreign authorities on the raw data that could not be provided.

Such raw data, for instance, would involve the primary radar information of other countries.

"The data involved would be official information, so the (foreign) country cannot simply give it to us on paper or in soft copy... they will select only the ones that can be revealed," the source said, adding that it was a common factor pertaining to any one country's security.

However, he said, whatever information had been shared with Malaysia was immediately shared with both the search operations team and the international investigation team to be analysed.

The NST was also informed that the United States government, early on in the search mission, had offered Malaysia help, saying that it would provide "anything possible".

The source said Malaysian authorities had asked for various items, including the use of the towed pinger locator and autonomous underwater vehicle, which led to the use of Bluefin-21, assets and personnel for the search mission and data from all relevant satellites.

He said this included the aid of the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap, located in Alice Springs in Australia's Northern Territory.

The facility is jointly run by Australia and the US, including its Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency and National Reconnaissance Office.

Malaysian authorities had also requested aid from the Australian and US governments, focusing on the Jindalee Operational Radar Network satellite. The over-the-horizon radar is able to monitor both air and sea movements across 37,000 sq km.

Malaysian authorities, however, were told by the US representatives that no satellites had made contact with MH370, denying them the right to view the data.

"They informed us that no contact was made (and) that was the end of it. We can't be forcing them to show us the data as they had already said there was nothing," the source said.

"However, if these countries do want to come forward, be it old or new data that has yet to be analysed by our team, they are very welcome to do so."



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