

Air Piracy Theory Gains More Credence

BY EILEEN NG AND JOAN LOWY
Associated Press

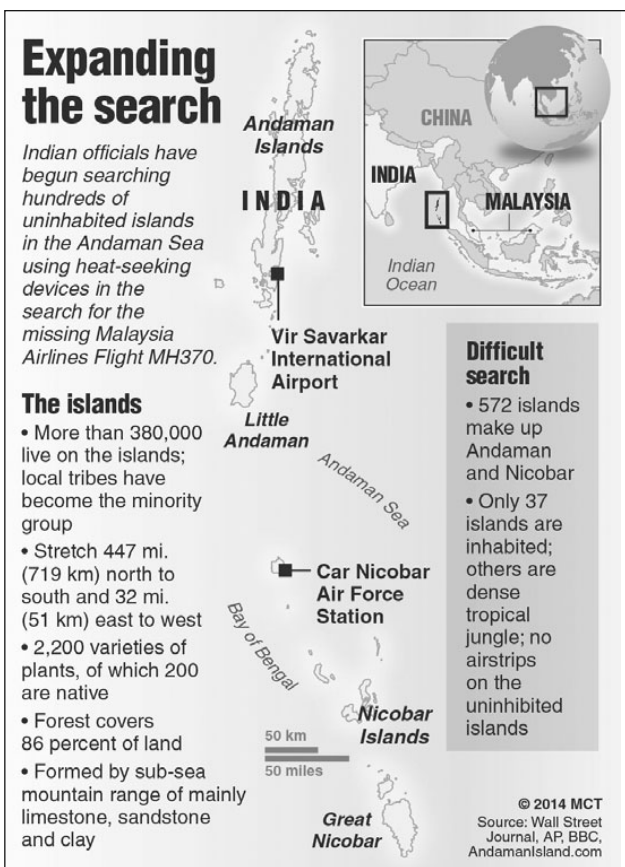
KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — Piracy and pilot suicide are among the scenarios under study as investigators grow increasingly certain the missing Malaysia Airlines jet changed course and headed west after its last radio contact with air traffic controllers.

The latest evidence suggests the plane didn't experience a catastrophic incident over the South China Sea as was initially suspected. Some experts theorize that one of the pilots, or someone else with flying experience, hijacked the plane or committed suicide by plunging the jet into the sea.

Adding to the speculation that someone was flying the jet, *The New York Times* on Friday quoted sources familiar with the investigation as saying that the plane experienced significant changes in altitude after it lost contact with ground control, and altered its course more than once.

A U.S. official told The Associated Press earlier that investigators are examining the possibility of "human intervention" in the plane's disappearance, adding it may have been "an act of piracy." The official, who wasn't authorized to talk to the media and spoke on condition of anonymity, said it was possible the plane may have landed somewhere. The official later said there was no solid information on who might have been involved.

While other theories are still being examined, the official said key evidence suggesting human intervention is that contact with the Boeing 777's transponder stopped about a dozen minutes before a messaging system on the jet quit. Such a gap would be unlikely in the case of an in-flight



catastrophe.

A Malaysian official, who declined to be identified because he is not authorized to brief the media, said only a skilled aviator could navigate the plane the way it was flown after its last confirmed location over the South China Sea. The official said it had been established with a "more than 50 percent" degree of certainty that military radar had picked up the missing plane after it dropped off civilian radar.

Malaysia's acting transport minister, Hishammuddin Hussein, said the country had yet to determine what happened to the plane after it ceased communicating with ground control about 40 minutes into

the flight to Beijing on March 8 with 239 people aboard.

He said investigators were still trying to establish that military radar records of a blip moving west across the Malay Peninsula into the Strait of Malacca showed Flight MH370.

"I will be the most happiest person if we can actually confirm that it is the MH370, then we can move all (search) assets from the South China Sea to the Strait of Malacca," he told reporters. Until then, he said, the international search effort would continue expanding east and west from the plane's last confirmed location.

Though some investigators are now convinced that "human intervention" caused

the disappearance, U.S. officials told the White House at a briefing Friday that they have "run all the traps" and come up with no good information on who might be involved, according to an official familiar with the meeting. The meeting was attended by State and Defense Department officials, the CIA, the Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board, among others.

"I don't think there is any consensus on a theory," the official said. "They're not hearing anything in their surveillance that would indicate that this is part of a plot."

Another U.S. official, who also spoke on condition of anonymity, said investigators looking for the plane have run out of clues except for a type of satellite data that has never been used before to find a missing plane, and is very inexact.

The data consists of attempts by an Inmarsat satellite to identify a broad area where the plane might be in case a messaging system aboard the plane should need to connect with the satellite, said the official. The official compared the location attempts, called a "handshake," to someone driving around with their cellphone not in use. As the phone from passes from the range of one cellphone tower to another, the towers note that the phone is in range in case messages need to be sent.

In the case of the Malaysian plane, there were successful attempts by the satellite to roughly locate the Boeing 777 about once an hour over four to five hours, the official said. "This is all brand new to us," the official said. "We've never had to use satellite handshaking as the best possible source of information."

Escaped Killer Recaptured in Florida

DEERFIELD BEACH, Fla. (AP) — In the nearly 40 years after he escaped from the maximum-security military prison at Fort Leavenworth, convicted killer James Robert Jones carved out a new life for himself in Florida, living under an assumed name, getting married and working for an air conditioning company.

It all came to an end this week when Jones — or Bruce Walter Keith, as the former Army private was known in Florida — was recaptured with the help of technology that was more sci-fi than reality when he broke out during the disco era: facial-recognition software.

"The first words out of his mouth were, 'I knew this would catch up with me someday,'" Barry Golden, a senior inspector with the U.S. Marshals Service, said Friday.

Jones, 59, was one of the Army's 15 most-wanted fugitives after his 1977 escape from the Kansas prison dubbed "The Castle" for its large walls and tower keeps.

He was convicted of murder and assault in the 1974 killing of a fellow soldier at Fort Dix in New Jersey.

LAX Workers Were Poorly Prepared

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Thousands of Los Angeles International Airport workers had no idea what to do when a gunman opened fire last year in a terminal because they were inadequately trained to deal with an emergency, according to a union report.

Members of SEIU United Service Workers West — sky caps, baggage handlers, wheelchair attendants and janitors — weren't prepared for an evacuation, were hampered by poor communication, and were essentially on their own during the chaos, as panicked, fleeing passengers ran onto the tarmac and dove onto luggage conveyor belts. In some instances, passengers were left alone in wheelchairs during the Nov. 1 shooting that killed one airport screener and injured three others.

Many issues outlined in the union report and by the airport itself were identified as deficient in 2011 by a special panel of experts convened by the former mayor to review public safety at LAX. Los Angeles World Airports began re-vamping emergency plans that were to be completed last summer. But in June, the airport commission gave the contractor 18 more months.

Peter Goelz, former managing director of the National Transportation Safety Board and an aviation safety and security consultant, said a lack of coordinated planning during an emergency can be a "fatal flaw" that endangers the public and workers.

"The airline industry and airports in particular have spent hundreds of millions of dollars since 9/11 in emergency response preparedness and upgrades, and the reality is that for airport service workers they're always the last ones considered in the planning even though they have absolutely the most direct contact with passengers," said Goelz, who had no role in the report.

NTSB: Tests Detected Natural Gas

NEW YORK (AP) — Federal investigators say underground tests conducted in the hours after a deadly New York City gas explosion detected the presence of natural gas.

NTSB team member Robert Sumwalt says the latest information seems to support the hypothesis that the explosion, which killed eight people, was caused by a gas leak.

Sumwalt said Friday that the utility Consolidated Edison dug 50 holes about 18 to 24 inches deep around the blast site and measured gas levels in those cavities soon after the explosion.

He says the gas concentration was up to 20 percent in at least five spots. He says normal levels in New York City soil should be zero.

He says workers have begun the process of pressure testing pipes to identify possible holes.

Malnutrition Grows Among Syrian Kids

KAB ELIAS, Lebanon (AP) — Trapped in her northern Syrian village by fighting, Mervat watched her newborn baby progressively shrink. Her daughter's dark eyes seemed to grow bigger as her face grew more skeletal. Finally, Mervat escaped to neighboring Lebanon, and a nurse told her the girl was starving.

The news devastated her. "They had to hold me when they told me. I wept," the 31-year-old mother said, speaking in the rickety, informal tent camp where she now lives with her husband in the eastern Lebanese town of Kab Elias.

Her daughter Shurook has been undergoing treatment the past three months and remains a wispy thing. The 9-month-old weighs 7 pounds (3.2 kilos) — though she's become more smiley and gregarious. Mervat spoke on condition she be identified only by her first name, fearing problems for her family in Syria.

Her case underscored how dramatically Syrian society has unraveled from a conflict that this weekend enters its fourth year. Such stark starvation was once rare in Syria, where President Bashar Assad's autocratic state ran a health system that provided nearly free care.

After Crimea, Wary Eastern Europe Asks: Who's Next?

BY ALISON MUTLER AND
MONIKA SCISLOWSKA
Associated Press

BUCHAREST, Romania — Broken promises of help from the West. A tragic history of Russian invasion that goes back centuries. A painful awareness that conflicts in this volatile region are contagious. These are the factors that make nations across Eastern Europe watch events in Ukraine — and tremble.

From leaders to ordinary people, there is a palpable sense of fear that Russia, seemingly able to thumb its nose at Western powers at will, may seek more opportunities for incursions in its former imperial backyard. The question many people are asking is: Who's next?

"There is first of all fear ... that there could be a possible contagion," Romanian Foreign Minister Titus Corlatean told The Associated Press in an interview. "Romania is extremely preoccupied."

Specifically, concerns run high that after taking over the strategic peninsula of Crimea, Russian President Vladimir Putin may be tempted to try a land grab in Moldova, where Russian troops are stationed in the breakaway province of Trans-Dniester. It's one of several "frozen conflicts" across Eastern Europe whose ranks Crimea — many in the West now say with resignation — has joined.

In Romania, which neighbors predominantly Romanian-speaking Moldova, Monica Nistorescu urged the West to stand up to Putin — lest he come to view himself as unbeatable.

"The world should stop seeing Putin as the invincible dragon with silver teeth," said Nistorescu, "because we will succeed in making him believe that Russia is what it once was."

Across the border,

Moldovan fears of Russian invasion were in no way theoretical: "We are afraid the conflict in Ukraine could reach us in Moldova," said Victor Cotruta, a clerk in the capital Chisinau. "Russian troops could take over Moldova in a day."

Many in the region are keenly aware that Poland had guarantees of military aid from France and Britain against Nazi aggression. But when Hitler invaded in 1939, France and Britain didn't send troops to Poland despite their declarations of war. That history feeds skepticism that NATO would come to the aid of eastern member nations in the event of a Russian attack.

"Poland's history shows that we should not count on others," novelist Jaroslaw Szulski told The AP.

Such feelings are particularly acute in the Baltic nations that are members of NATO and the European Union. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have sizable Russian populations that Moscow periodically declares it needs to "protect" — the key word Putin used in justifying its invasion of Crimea.

"I'm a bit skeptical," said Tina Seeman in Tallinn, Estonia, when asked if she believed the West would come to her nation's rescue. "I'd like to believe so but I can't say I trust them 100 percent."

Moscow routinely accuses Estonia and Latvia of discriminating against their Russian-speaking minorities. Tensions

between Russia and Estonia soared in 2007, when protests by Russian-speakers against the relocation of a Soviet-era war monument ended in street riots. Many Estonians blamed Moscow — which has handed out passports to ethnic Russians in the Baltics — for stirring up the protests.

As she arrived at an EU emergency summit on Ukraine last week, Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė expressed more confidence than Seeman in the U.S.-led security alliance: "Thank God! Thank God that we are already 10 years in NATO!"

But she, too, expressed grave concerns about Russia's actions: "Russia today is trying to rewrite the borders in Europe after World War II."

History weighs heavily in Eastern European minds as they contemplate the future.

Many people see Russia's seizure of Crimea as similar to their experiences after World War II, when Soviet troops rolled through towns and villages, effectively putting them under the Kremlin's rule for decades.

"Of course there's a potential threat for us in the future," Katerina Zapadlova, a waitress in a Prague cafe, said with a bitter smile. She recalled how Soviet troops rolled into Czechoslovakia in 1968 to crush the Prague Spring liberalization movement.

"I'm afraid," she said, "It's because of what they did to us in the past."

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