

Final Words From Missing Malaysian Jet Came After Systems Shutdown

BY CHRIS BRUMMITT AND JIM GOMEZ
 Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — When someone at the controls calmly said the last words heard from the missing Malaysian jetliner, one of the Boeing 777's communications systems had already been disabled, authorities said Sunday, adding to suspicions that one or both of the pilots were involved in the disappearance of the flight.

Investigators also examined a flight simulator confiscated from the home of one of the pilots and dug through the background of all 239 people on board, as well as the ground crew that serviced the plane.

The Malaysia Airlines jet took off from Kuala Lumpur in the wee hours of March 8, headed to Beijing. On Saturday, the Malaysian government announced findings that strongly suggested the plane was deliberately diverted and may have flown as far north as Central Asia or south into the vast reaches of the Indian Ocean.

Authorities have said someone on board the plane first disabled one of its communications systems — the Aircraft

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HISHAMMUDDIN HUSSEIN

and Communications Addressing and Reporting System, or ACARS — about 40 minutes after takeoff. The ACARS equipment sends information about the jet's engines and other data to the airline.

Around 14 minutes later, the transponder that identifies the plane to commercial radar systems was also shut down. The fact that both systems went dark separately offered strong evidence that the plane's disappearance was deliberate.

On Sunday, Malaysian Defense Minister Hishammuddin Hussein told a news conference that the final, reassuring words from the cockpit — "All right, good night" — were spoken to air traffic controllers after the ACARS system was shut off. Whoever spoke did not mention any trouble on board.

Air force Maj. Gen. Affendi Buang told

reporters he did not know whether it was the pilot or co-pilot who spoke to air traffic controllers.

Given the expanse of land and water that might need to be searched, finding the wreckage could take months or longer. Or it might never be located. Establishing what happened with any degree of certainty will probably require evidence from cockpit voice recordings and the plane's flight-data recorders.

The search area now includes 11 countries the plane might have flown over, Hishammuddin said, adding that the number of countries involved in the operation had increased from 14 to 25.

"The search was already a highly complex, multinational effort," he said. "It has now become even more difficult."

The search effort initially focused on the relatively shallow waters of the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca, where the plane was first thought to be. Hishammuddin said he had asked governments to hand over sensitive radar and satellite data to try to get a better idea of the plane's final movements.

With more information, he said, the search zone could be narrowed "to an area that is more feasible."

Records Access Denied More Than Ever

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Obama administration more often than ever censored government files or outright denied access to them last year under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act, according to a new analysis of federal data by The Associated Press.

The administration cited more legal exceptions it said justified withholding materials and refused a record number of times to turn over files quickly that might be especially newsworthy. Most agencies also took longer to answer records requests, the analysis found.

The government's own figures from 99 federal agencies covering six years show that half way through its second term, the administration has made few meaningful improvements in the way it releases records despite its promises from Day 1 to become the most transparent administration in history.

In category after category — except for reducing numbers of old requests and a slight increase in how often it waived copying fees — the government's efforts to be more open about its activities last year were their worst since President Barack Obama took office.

In a year of intense public interest over the National Security Agency's surveillance programs, the government cited national security to withhold information a record 8,496 times — a 57 percent increase over a year earlier and more than double Obama's first year, when it cited that reason 3,658 times. The Defense Department, including the NSA, and the CIA accounted for nearly all those. The Agriculture Department's Farm Service Agency cited national security six times, the Environmental Protection Agency did twice and the National Park Service once.

Crackdown In Egypt Sees 16K Detained

CAIRO (AP) — Egypt's crackdown on Islamists has jailed 16,000 people over the past eight months in the country's biggest round-up in nearly two decades, according to previously unreleased figures from security officials. Rights activists say reports of abuses in prisons are mounting, with prisoners describing systematic beatings and miserable conditions for dozens packed into tiny cells.

The Egyptian government has not released official numbers for those arrested in the sweeps since the military ousted Islamist President Mohammed Morsi in July. But four senior officials — two from the Interior Ministry and two from the military — gave The Associated Press a count of 16,000, including about 3,000 top- or mid-level members of Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood.

The count, which is consistent with recent estimates by human rights groups, was based on a tally kept by the Interior Ministry to which the military also has access. It includes hundreds of women and minors, though the officials could not give exact figures. The officials gave the figures to the AP on condition of anonymity because the government has not released them.

St. Patrick's Day Festivities Kick Off

NEW YORK (AP) — St. Patrick's Day festivities were in full swing Sunday with the usual merriment of bagpipes and beer, but political tensions lingered in the northeastern U.S., where city leaders will be conspicuously absent from parades over gay rights issues.

New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio will become the first mayor in decades to sit out the traditional march Monday because parade organizers refuse to let participants carry pro-gay signs. Boston Mayor Martin Walsh wasn't marching in his city's parade Sunday, either, after talks broke down that would have allowed a gay group to march.

Still, thousands of green-clad spectators came out for the parade in Boston to watch bagpipers, and organizers of a float intended to promote diversity threw Mardi Gras-type beads at onlookers. A similar scene played out in downtown Philadelphia.

In Georgia, the dome of Savannah's City Hall will be lit green, and several thousand people braved temperatures in the teens on Sunday to march with pipe and drum bands in Detroit.

General's Deal Drops Sex Assault Charge

BY MICHAEL BIESECKER
 Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Defense attorneys said Sunday that an Army general has agreed to a plea deal that includes the dropping of sexual assault charges against him.

Lawyers representing Brig. Gen. Jeffrey Sinclair said he will plead to lesser charges in exchange for having the sexual assault charges dropped, along with two other counts that might have required Sinclair to register as a sex offender.

Sinclair, 51, had been accused of twice forcing a female captain under his command to perform oral sex on him during a three-year extramarital affair. But the Army's case against Sinclair crumbled in recent weeks as questions arose

about whether the woman had lied in a pre-trial hearing.

The defense provided a copy of the plea agreement approved and signed by a high-ranking general overseeing the case. Sinclair is expected to appear Monday morning in court at Fort Bragg.

The married 27-year Army veteran pleaded guilty earlier this month to having improper relationships with three subordinate officers, including the female captain who accused him of assault. He also pleaded guilty to adultery, which is a crime in the military.

Under the plea deal reached this weekend, Sinclair will also admit abusing a government credit card he used while traveling to visit his mistress.

Defense attorney Richard

Scheff said that Sinclair is admitting to his mistakes, put pointed out that the general is pleading guilty to behavior that likely wouldn't be criminal in the civilian world.

"After wasting millions of taxpayer dollars, the Army finally admitted what it's known for many months: General Sinclair is innocent of sexual assault," Scheff said. "Brigadier General Sinclair has admitted to mistakes that are normally a matter between husbands and wives, or employees and HR departments. It's time to put this matter to rest."

A spokesman for Fort Bragg commander Maj. Gen. Clarence K.K. Chinn, who approved Sinclair's plea deal, could not immediately be reached for comment.

According to the defense, a separate agreement

reached with Chinn will dictate what punishments Sinclair will receive. In theory, he faces more than 15 years in prison, though the plea agreement is unlikely to require anything close to the maximum penalties. Sinclair may also be forced to retire at reduced rank, costing him dearly in pension benefits.

That part of the agreement will remain secret until after the judge overseeing the case, Col. James Pohl, conducts a sentencing hearing later this week. That process will include testimony from about 20 witnesses. It was not immediately clear whether his primary accuser will be among those called to the stand. The Associated Press generally does not name those who say they were victims of sexual assault.

Crimea

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thousands of troops that now occupy the peninsula, which has traded hands repeatedly since ancient times.

The referendum offered voters the choice of seeking annexation by Russia or remaining in Ukraine with greater autonomy. After 50 percent of the ballots were counted, more than 95 percent of voters had approved splitting off and joining Russia, according to Mikhail Malishev, head of the referendum committee.

Final results were not expected until Monday.

Opponents of secession appeared to have stayed away Sunday, denouncing the vote as a cynical power play and land grab by Russia.

Putin insisted the referendum was conducted in "full accordance with international law and the U.N. charter."

Russia was expected to face strong sanctions Monday from the U.S. and Europe for going forward with the vote, which could also encourage rising pro-Russian sentiment in Ukraine's east and lead to further divisions in this nation of 46 million. Residents in western Ukraine and the capital, Kiev, are strongly pro-West and Ukrainian nationalist.

Andrew Weiss, vice president for Russian and East Eu-

ropean studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, suggested the confrontation could intensify.

Russia "is really turning its back on the outside world and is basically going to say to the West, 'Now, go ahead. Show us how tough you are.' And the West, I think, is struggling to come with an adequate response."

The Crimean parliament planned to meet Monday to formally ask Moscow to be annexed, and Crimean lawmakers were to fly to Moscow later in the day for talks, Crimea's pro-Russia prime minister said on Twitter.

Russian lawmaker Vladimir Zhirinovskiy said the annexation could take "from three days to three months," according to the Interfax news agency.

Some residents in Crimea said they feared the new Ukrainian government that took over when President Viktor Yanukovich fled to Russia last month would oppress them.

"It's like they're crazy Texans in western Ukraine. Imagine if the Texans suddenly took over power (in Washington) and told everyone they should speak Texan," said Ilya Khlebanov, a voter in Simferopol.

Ukraine's new prime minister insisted that neither Ukraine nor the West would recognize the vote.

"Under the stage direction of the Russian Federation, a circus performance is underway: the so-called referendum," Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk said Sunday. "Also taking part in the performance are 21,000 Russian troops, who with their guns are trying to prove the legality of the referendum."

As soon as the polls closed, the White House again denounced the vote.

"The international community will not recognize the results of a poll administered under threats of violence," it said in a statement. "Russia's actions are dangerous and destabilizing."

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