

Brazil-France Effort Recovers in the Atlantic 17 Bodies from Air France Jet

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Seventeen bodies from the 228 people aboard Air France flight 447 have now been found by the Brazilian-French joint search effort. Fifteen of them were discovered Sunday, two others had been located the day before. France's frigate Ventose took in eight of the bodies found Sunday.

The bodies and debris were found 1,166 km (725 miles) from Recife, but Brazilian authorities still don't know if that's where the Air France jet fell down.

A Brazilian Navy ship, the frigate Constituição, is en route to Fernando de Noronha, in Brazil, transporting nine bodies - four men, four women and one whose sex could not be determined. All bodies will be taken eventually to Recife, capital of the Brazilian Northeastern state of Pernambuco, where they are expected Tuesday. There they will be identified by the Federal police and the Coroner's Office.

According to Brazil's Air Force lieutenant colonel, Henry Munhoz, although the investigation of the accident is the responsibility of the French authorities, Brazilian officials will be in charge of identifying the bodies. "The priority is to pick up the bodies and after that the wreckage," said Munhoz.

FAB (Brazilian Air Force) officials told reporters that additional bodies had been sighted floating on Sunday and that they should be picked up soon. Navy officials informed that the ships being used in the search operation are equipped with refrigeration to store the bodies.

At the current pace the rescue operation might take a long time because some of the vessels being used (five from Brazil, one from France) are very slow with a maximum speed of 40 km/h (25 m/h).

Besides the six ships and boats, the search is being conducted by 12 Brazilian planes and helicopters plus two French ones (Falcon 50 and Atlantic Rescue D). Brazilian aircraft continue sweeping the Atlantic in search of other wreckage focuses.

Controversy

Brazilian search crews on Saturday had retrieved the first bodies in the Atlantic and investigators said faulty speed readings had been found on the same type of jets.

Navy ships found the bodies of two men and debris including a blue seat with a serial number matching Flight 447, a rucksack containing a vaccination card, and a briefcase with an Air France ticket inside, rescue officials said.

"This morning at 8:14 a.m., we confirmed the rescue from the water of pieces and bodies that belonged to the Air France flight," Air Force spokesman Jorge Amaral told reporters in the northeastern Brazilian city of Recife.

Brazilian Air Force planes and Navy ships have been scouring a swathe of the Atlantic about 1,100 km northeast of Brazil's coast since the Airbus A330-200 plane disappeared on Monday, killing all 228 people on board.

The crash of the flight from Rio de Janeiro to Paris was the world's deadliest air disaster since 2001 and the worst in Air France's 75-year history.

Rescuers, who said that only family members will be informed of the identity of the corpses, believe many bodies could have sunk or been devoured by sharks.

French investigators trying to establish the cause of the crash said on Saturday that Airbus had detected faulty speed readings on its A330 jets before last week and had recommended that clients replace a sensor.

Air France later issued a statement saying it had begun changing airspeed sensors on Airbus long-haul aircraft due to icing fears five weeks before the crash, but only after failing to agree on a fix with Airbus.

Investigators are considering the possibility that the speed sensors on Flight 447 may have iced up, resulting in faulty readings that caused the pilots to set the plane at a dangerous speed as it passed thunderstorms.

But the head of France's air accident agency (BEA) said in a news conference in France that it was too soon to say if problems with the pressure-based speed sensors were in any way responsible for the disaster.

"Some of the sensors (on the A330) were earmarked to be changed ... but that does not mean that without these replacement parts, the (Air France) plane would have been defective," BEA chief Paul-Louis Arslanian said.

Airbus confirmed it issued a bulletin asking the plane's 50 or so airline operators to consider changing the speed sensors, known as Pitot tubes, but it said it was an optional measure to improve performance and not related to safety.

In its statement on Saturday, Air France said it began noticing airspeed problems from icing on both A330 and A340 planes in May 2008 and had requested a solution from Airbus.

According to Air France, Airbus proposed testing different sensors despite earlier doubting that they would resolve the problem, but the airline declined to wait and started changing them from April 27.

The doomed Air France plane sent 24 automated messages in a span of four minutes indicating a series of system failures before it vanished, Arslanian said.

In the middle of this stream of data was one message showing inconsistent speed readings from the A330's sensors, investigators said.

The messages also showed that the autopilot was off, though it was impossible to say whether it had disengaged itself, as it is designed to do when it receives suspect data, or whether the pilot had decided to turn it off, Arslanian said.

Meteorological experts said the jet crossed a storm zone but that the weather did not seem to pose a particular threat.

Investigators have said they are not optimistic that they will be able to locate the plane's flight recorders, which could provide vital information about the cause of the crash.

Replacement

Air France has said it is accelerating replacement of speed monitors on Airbus planes following the disappearance of a jet over the Atlantic six days ago.

The French airline said it had noticed problems arising from icing on the monitors last year and had begun changing them in April. There has been speculation that faulty data on the old-type sensors may have caused the crash of the Rio de Janeiro-Paris flight with 228 people on board.

Investigators say that sensors on board the missing Airbus 330 were providing "inconsistent data" in the minutes before it went missing.

On Saturday, Air France said that in May 2008 it had begun noticing "incidents of loss of airspeed information during cruise flight" on its A330s and A340s jets - although only a "small number" of incidents had been reported.

The airline said it then contacted Airbus, who sent a recommendation to replace the monitors.

However, Air France stressed that the manufacturers had not made this a safety requirement.

The statement said that "without prejudging a link with the causes of the accident, Air France has accelerated this [replacement] programme". It added that this did not necessarily mean the aircraft was not safe to fly.

French investigators also warned against drawing early conclusions.

In related news from Kuala Lumpur Singapore Airlines CEO Chew Choon Seng was quoted saying that the Airbus A330 was a good plane.

"It's a safe plane, it's a good plane", he said adding that "We should not jump to conclusions".

Chew Choon Seng is participating at a IATA meeting where airlines are considering prospects for the industry in 2009.

"Singapore Airlines will honour all existing contracts for plane orders" said CEO Chew Choon Seng. As of March, Singapore Airlines had orders for 16 A330-200s and for 33 other Airbus planes.

Korean Air which also has A330s said the aircraft were good from a technical point of view. "It's a good plane. I think it's an isolated case" said Korean Air CEO Cho Yang Ho from Kuala Lumpur. He added the company has no plans to ground the aircrafts.

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