



Update: Body count hits 17 in Atlantic Air France crash

Associated Press

Updated: 06/08/2009 08:02:57 AM EDT



In this photo released by Brazil's Air Force, debris of the Air France Flight 447 in the Atlantic Ocean, Sunday, June 7, 2009. Four more bodies were found Sunday bobbing in the ocean near the spot where an Air France jet is believed to have crashed a week ago, bringing the total number of bodies plucked from the water to six, Brazil's military said. (Brazilian Air Force/Associated Press)

RECIFE, Brazil (AP) - Search ships methodically worked through a "sea of debris" from a doomed Air France jet Sunday, recovering 15 more bodies near the spot where the Airbus A330 is believed to have gone down a week ago.

Two bodies were recovered Saturday, and Brazilian and French ships picked up 15 more Sunday after pilots participating in a grid search reported additional sightings. The bodies have been found in an area about 45 miles (70 kilometers) from where the jet sent out messages signaling electrical failures and loss of cabin pressure.

"We're navigating through a sea of debris," Brazilian Navy Capt. Giucemar Tabosa Cardoso said.

Brazil's military was not releasing detailed information about bodies or debris that have been spotted from the air but not taken aboard ships, after sea trash was mistaken last week for a cargo pallet from the plane, prompting criticism.

Flight 447 disappeared and likely broke up in midair in turbulent weather May 31 during a flight from Rio de Janeiro to Paris with 228 people aboard - all now presumed dead.

The investigation is increasingly focused on whether external instruments on the Airbus A330 may have iced over, confusing speed sensors and leading computers to set the plane's speed too fast or slow - a potentially deadly mistake.

The French agency investigating the disaster said airspeed instruments on the plane had not been replaced as the maker had recommended, but cautioned that it was too early to draw conclusions about what role that may have played in the crash.

The agency, BEA, said the plane received inconsistent airspeed readings from different instruments as it struggled in a massive thunderstorm.

France is leading the investigation into the cause of the crash, and will try to recover the plane's black box data and voice recorders, which could reveal why the jet crashed. Brazilian officials are focusing solely on the recovery of victims and plane wreckage.

In Brazil, Air Force Col. Henry Munhoz said nine bodies have been recovered by Brazilian authorities: four men, four women and one that was impossible to identify by gender. He said he did not have

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information about the genders of the eight bodies recovered by French military helicopters that were transferred to a French ship.

The search is focusing on a zone of several hundred square miles (square kilometers) roughly 400 miles (640 kilometers) northeast of the Fernando de Noronha islands off Brazil's northern coast.

Munhoz and Cardoso declined comment on the condition of the recovered bodies, saying that information would be too emotionally painful for relatives.

Authorities also announced that searchers spotted two airplane seats, debris with Air France's logo, and recovered dozens of structural components from the plane. They had already recovered jet wing fragments.

Munhoz said there is "no more doubt" that the wreckage is from Flight 447 following the confusion that broke out with the wooden pallet that turned out not to be from the jet.

Hundreds of personal items belonging to the passengers have been recovered, but Munhoz said authorities would not immediately identify them because relatives of the victims were devastated by an announcement Saturday that a laptop computer and briefcase containing a plane ticket had been found.

"We don't want to cause them more suffering," Munhoz said.

The bodies and plane wreckage were being transported by Brazilian and French ships and should arrive Tuesday at the Brazilian islands of Fernando de Noronha, where the military has set up a staging post for the search operation. From there,

remains and debris will be taken to the northeastern coastal city of Recife for identification.

Air France Flight 447 emitted its last signals roughly 400 miles (640 kilometers) northeast of the Fernando de Noronha islands.

Brazilian authorities have refused since the search began to release precise coordinates where they are looking, except to say the area lies southeast of the last jet transmission and could have indicated the pilot was trying to turn around in mid-flight and head to Fernando de Noronha.

Munhoz on Sunday would not say how far apart the bodies had been found, and referred comment to French authorities as to whether the locations of the bodies could help determine whether the plane broke up in the air.

The Pentagon has said there are no signs of terrorism. Brazil's defense minister said the possibility was never considered. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner agreed that there is no evidence supporting a "terrorism theory," but said "we cannot discard that for now."

The U.S. Navy is sending two high-tech devices to French ships that will help them locate the black boxes, a senior U.S. defense official said Saturday.

The Towed Pinger Locators, which can detect emergency beacons to a depth of 20,000 feet (6,100 meters), are being flown to Brazil on Monday with a U.S. Navy team, said the official, who requested anonymity because the decision has not been announced.

The team will deliver the locators to two French tugs that will use them to listen for transmissions from the black box, the official said.

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France has appointed Foreign Ministry official Pierre-Jean Vandoorne to act as ambassador to families of the crash victims, the French prime minister's office said in a statement Sunday.

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