English translation Page 1 of 4

The plane that wasn't MH370

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Respond File

Kudahuvadhoo would be hard to find by accident. The island is located at the southern end of the Dhaalu Atoll, between two and three degrees north of the equator, and is part of the fabled Maldives, but it's not on the luxury tourist map. It has a total of five mosques and four cars. Its population suddenly swelled to 3,500 when it had to accommodate the survivors from two neighbouring islands destroyed by the great tsunami of December 2004. Its days follow the rhythm of calls to prayer. The weeks are punctuated by the arrival, every Wednesday, of the cargo ferry from the Maldivian capital Malé, bringing passengers, chickens, mopeds, sacks of rice or onions and the occasional bonus of a fridge or a fan. Every Saturday, the same ferry returns to Malé.

But in the dawning hours of Saturday March 8, 2014, a sighting in the sky over Kudahuvadhoo caused the village became the focus of world attention. Coinciding with the night on which Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing disappeared from the radar forty minutes into the flight, a number of islanders claimed to have seen something passing overhead, at low altitude, in the early hours of the morning: "a large plane, flying low and making a lot of noise". Could it have been MH370? The flight time from Kuala Lumpur would at first sight appear to be compatible with this theory - assuming that the aircraft had turned due west after take-off for Beijing. And since it was scheduled to land in China at 6.30am, which was roughly the same time as the "sighting" over the Maldives, this assumption gathered support.

Incompatible with the official scenario

Malaysia was quick to reject the islanders' eye-witness accounts out of hand. Besides, the trajectory over the Maldives was incompatible with the official account the disappearance, according to which the aircraft had changed direction forty minutes into the flight and flown due south until it ran out of fuel and ultimately came down somewhere in the Indian Ocean south west of Perth (Australia), in one of the most hostile areas of the planet. But in the climate of distrust that had set in between the families and the authorities, Malaysia's denial had the opposite effect: it gave credence to the notion that the flight that had famously disappeared with 239 people on board had indeed flown over the atoll.

Read more: <u>Un an après, l'improbable disparition du MH370</u> (*One year on, the improbable disappearance of MH370*)

Since then, the French weekly magazine *Paris Match* and Australian daily *The Australian* are the only two publications to have sent someone to report on the spot. The Australian report, published one year later on April 4, revisited the possibility of the aircraft having flown over the Maldives. It was widely circulated, rekindling the controversy and hope along with it. But if flight MH370 had indeed been the aircraft spotted on the morning in question, it could not have come down at the location where hugely expensive submarine search operations, led by Australia, are still going on. Almost all of the 60,000 square kilometres of seabed,

English translation Page 2 of 4

initially identified as the "priority" search area for the aircraft, have now been mapped. Having drawn a blank, the area was doubled in size last April.

Zuhuriyya Ali is a 50-year-old housewife. She greets us in the inner courtyard of her breeze-block home with a glass of rose-flavoured milk and a bowl of fresh mangoes. Leaning against a rack on which saucepans from the last meal are drying in the sun, she musters her concentration to provide a scrupulously accurate description of what she saw on that morning of March 8, 2014. A "big plane making a lot of noise", "coming from the same direction as usual, but much lower". She points to a section of her zinc roof and draws an arc in the sky. Zuhuriyya Ali has her benchmarks to remember the time: 6.15am, give or take a few minutes. Because at 5am it was prayer time, and from 6am onwards she sweeps her courtyard.

Humaam Dhonmamk, a 16-year-old schoolboy, had gone out to retrieve a garment from the washing line. He was getting ready for school which started at 7am. He saw the aircraft pass overhead through a gap between two tall trees. Using the compass on a mobile phone to point to where the aircraft came from, the direction is the same as that indicated by Zuhuriyya Ali: west-north-west. Logically speaking, flight MH370 should have been coming from the opposite direction – due east, or east-north-east. Humaam stares wide-eyed as he checks the location of Malaysia on Google Maps. The information troubles him. There was blue and red on the cockpit, but "no (Malaysia Airlines) logo".

Abdu Rasheed Ibrahim is the 46-year-old handyman at the magistrates' court. He was busy fishing, standing in the water, when he heard the aircraft. But, unusually for the equator, there was a strong wind blowing, and because it was blowing from more or less the opposite direction, he didn't really see the plane until it was directly above him. When the aircraft banked to head south-south-east, he distinctly saw "some red under the portholes, some red around the door". Hussain Shakir, vice-president of the island council, is puzzled. "If the aircraft had come down in our waters, we would have found bits of wreckage," he says. "We have a lot of "dhonys" [fishing boats]. They have telephones, even if they're a long way away, they notify us if something happens".

The fuel issue

In Malé, at the office of the Maldivian civil aviation authority in government house, the authority's chairman Ibrahim Faizal is disturbed by the whole affair and would like to get to the bottom of it. Once Malaysia came asking for details about this plane, the civil aviation authority was sidelined and the investigation was placed in the hands of the defence and police authorities. The first eye-witness accounts were initially published in the local newspaper *Haveeru* on March 18, 2014, ten days after the event. At that point, there was still a genuine hope of finding MH370. The police and defence authorities then rushed investigators to Kudahuvadhoo to question the witnesses. Measurements were taken. But the police report was never made public. The civil aviation authority called for its publication on several occasions, but in vain. "The witness statements were highly inconsistent", was all that the spokesman for the Maldivian police was prepared to say.

According to Captain Ibrahim Rasheed, head of Maldivian civil aviation operations, it could have been one of the many flights between the Middle East and Australia. "When they enter our airspace, they're still quite low, between 31,000 and 33,000 feet, on account of their fuel reserves," says the former pilot, but even though he offers this as an explanation he's not very satisfied with it. What the Kudahuvadhoo islanders described was much lower than 30,000 feet (9,000 metres), although none of the witnesses considered the aircraft's altitude to be

English translation Page 3 of 4

threateningly low. "It didn't appear to be falling, it was just flying lower than normal", young Humaam told us.

On the other hand, Ibrahim Rasheed is considerably more sure of his ground when talking about the fire extinguisher found twelve days later, on Monday March 24, 2014, on the island of Baarah, to the north of the Maldivian archipelago. The spherical object, which looks like a floating mine and is also the same shape as a certain type of aircraft-hold fire extinguisher, had been identified by a Maldivian aeronautical engineer, according to quotes appearing in *Haveeru* and subsequently in *Paris Match*, as being "very probably (...) a Boeing fire extinguisher". For his part, the former pilot is adamant that this item hasn't come from an aircraft and certainly not from a Boeing: "A boat would be more likely." He supplied copies to *Le Monde* of the twelve photos from the technical report sent to Malaysia. According to his experts, none of the serial numbers on the item matches the parts used by Boeing.

At the end of the day, the eye witnesses on Kudahuvadhoo are in agreement on two things: the direction of the aircraft, from north-west to south-east, and the time at which they saw it, around 6.15am local time. But at 6.15am in the Maldives, it's 9.15am in Beijing. Looking at the numbers, MH370 had 49.1 tonnes of fuel, which was its fuel requirement for the flight, plus the necessary reserve for emergencies. Having taken off from Kuala Lumpur at 0.41am, with a scheduled arrival time of 6.30am in Beijing, that would have allowed the aircraft to keep flying until 8am, or 8.30am at the latest, Kuala Lumpur or Beijing time. But not, under any circumstances, 9.15am, or the equivalent time in the Maldives of 6.15am. It would have run out of fuel, simple as that.

A DHC-8 operated by Maldivian

So what did the Kudhahuvadhoo islanders actually see? According to Adam Saeed, who teaches Dhivehi (the Maldivian language) at the Dhaalu Atoll education centre, "I was playing ball with my son, when he pointed to the sky and shouted: "Daddy! plane! plane!" My first thought was that it was a plane coming in to land at the nearby airport. I was just annoyed that it was flying so low and disturbing us all on a Saturday morning". He too has made a statement to the police.

According to the civil aviation authority's official record of flights across the zone, there was a flight on March 8, 2014 - domestic flight number DQA149 from Malé to Veymandhoo, operated by the airline company Maldivian - which landed at 6.33am at Thimarafushi airport, on the neighbouring Thaa Atoll, some 50 kilometres south- south-east of Kuda Huvadhoo. The aircraft was a DHC-8 twin-engine 50-seater model that is notoriously noisy. According to a professional expert we consulted, the pilot of flight DQA149 could have made an unusual approach due to unfamiliarity with the route (the airport had only been in operation for a few months) or on account of the unusually strong wind. Since Thimarafushi airport has no control tower, and the radar systems in the capital are not powerful enough to cover this zone, no-one noticed this aberration which would have been perfectly justifiable in the context of adjusting to the weather conditions. No-one, that is, except for a few Kudahuvadhoo islanders...

Aircraft operated by Maldivian have red around the door and portholes and blue on the tail, which matches the descriptions recorded. Although the islanders are reported in some of the previously published accounts as claiming to have seen a *jumbo jet*" or a "*jet plane*" with "a red line under the portholes" (as on the Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777s), these details were not mentioned in any of the witness statements that we obtained. "In all probability, the

English translation Page 4 of 4

plane that the islanders saw was this domestic flight. There's nothing to convince us that it could have been MH370: neither the route nor the timing support that theory", says Ibrahim Faizal, head of the Maldives civil aviation authority, in an interview with *Le Monde*. But despite its inconsistencies, many families are clinging to this scenario as they try to imagine what ultimately happened to the plane, and with it their loved ones... We may now have identified the mysterious plane over Kuda Huvadhoo, but we are still no closer to solving the mystery of flight MH370.