

Flight 261 voice recorder found

Flight data recorder still sought, but search for survivors called off

PORT HUENEME, Calif. (AP) — Searchers recovered one of the "black box" recorders Wednesday that could reveal more clues about what caused an Alaska Airlines jet to crash in the ocean off the California coast.

A remote-controlled underwater robot called Scorpio broke the surface of the Santa Barbara Channel shortly before sundown clutching the cockpit voice recorder, which contains tape of conversations between crew members, air traffic controllers and any other sounds in the cockpit.

National Transportation Safety Board spokesman Terry Williams confirmed the box was the cockpit recorder. The search continued for a companion box — the flight data recorder — that records data on the plane's mechanical operation.

Alaska Flight 261 plunged into the Pacific on Monday as the pilots struggled with a jammed horizontal stabilizer on the tail of the plane, according to radio conversations between the pilots

and air traffic controllers. Killed were 88 crew and passengers on the flight to San Francisco and Seattle from Puerto Vallarta, a Mexican vacation spot.

Investigators confirmed Wednesday they were looking into a report that the plane had problems with a part of the stabilizer on the flight down to Mexico. The device keeps the plane flying level. The airline said it was unaware of any problems with the plane.

Authorities also began analyzing recordings of the pilots' conversations with a Seattle maintenance crew made while the pilots tried to control the plane in the terrifying moments before it nose-dived into the sea.

Earlier Wednesday, dozens of Coast Guard and Navy ships were ordered to abandon the search for survivors and shift their focus to recovering flight recorders and wreckage.

The wreckage is about 700 feet down. Divers cannot operate below about 300 feet, so the search is being

carried out by three unmanned vehicles.

The search for survivors was called off over the protest of some family members who held out hope that some of the plane's passengers and crew might still be alive in the chilly waters of the Santa Barbara Channel.

"We have far exceeded our estimate of survivability," Coast Guard Vice Adm. Thomas Collins said.

On shore, investigators interviewed airline employees about a report in The Seattle Times that a different crew of pilots complained of problems with the aircraft's horizontal stabilizer as they headed toward Puerto Vallarta.

Alaska Airlines spokesman Jack Evans in Seattle denied the report: "We stand by what we said earlier this week, which is that we're not aware of any maintenance anomalies with this aircraft."

NTSB member John Hammerschmidt said the agency is

"We have far exceeded our estimate of survivability."

Vice Adm. Thomas Collins
United States Coast Guard

investigating the newspaper report and is interviewing pilots from the earlier flight.

Meanwhile, a jammed horizontal stabilizer forced an American Airlines MD-80 to land in Phoenix 20 minutes after takeoff Wednesday, said Phil Frame, a spokesman for the NTSB in Washington.

The plane, which had been headed toward Dallas, is part of the same series of aircraft as the Alaska MD-83 that crashed.

Israel debate turns confrontational

Lawmakers walk out in protest over nuclear weapon arsenal increase.

JERUSALEM (AP) — The first public parliamentary debate of Israel's top-secret nuclear weapons arsenal degenerated into an ugly confrontation Wednesday when an Arab legislator announced that Israel has up to 300 nuclear warheads, prompting Jewish lawmakers to call him a spokesman for terrorists.

Military censorship has always forbidden reports in the local media about Israel's nuclear arsenal. But Issam Mahoul's speech, broadcast live on television, gave Israelis their first opportunity to hear details from one of their own.

Most Jewish lawmakers marched out of parliament in protest.

A visibly uncomfortable Cabinet minister, Haim Ramon, responded to Mahoul by repeating Israel's well-known, yet vague nuclear policy statement, and refuting Mahoul's premise that the public has the right to know.

Ramon said Israel would not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East, a decades-old policy known here as "ambiguity," implying that Israel has nuclear arms capability, but not actual bombs.

Two diplomats from the Egyptian embassy in Tel Aviv watched the debate from the gallery. Egypt has been pressing for Israel to sign the nuclear nonproliferation treaty and get rid of the weapons it has never admitted having.

Jewish members interrupted Mahoul's speech with catcalls as he declared: "All the world knows that Israel is a vast warehouse of atomic, biological and chemical weapons that serves as the anchor for the Middle East arms race."

Some lawmakers called him a spokesman for Arab terrorists.

"You are committing a crime against Israeli Arabs today," shouted Ofer Pines-Paz, an Arab and chairman of Prime Minister Ehud Barak's coalition in parliament.

Undeterred, Mahoul went on to claim that Israel's three new German-built submarines "will be fitted with

"You are committing a crime against Israeli Arabs today."

Ofer Pines-Paz

chairman of Prime Minister Ehud Barak's coalition in parliament

nuclear weapons" to provide Israel the capacity to retaliate if hit with a nuclear attack.

Mahoul said the policy undermined government claims that its nuclear threat is a deterrent to attack.

He warned that the nuclear stockpile is a hazard, turning "this little piece of territory into a nuclear garbage bin, poisoned and poisoning, that could send us all up in a mushroom cloud."

Mahoul said Israel's vague policy statement had lost all credibility, pointing to disclosures by Mordechai Vanunu, who worked at Israel's desert nuclear reactor before revealing nuclear weapons secrets to the London Sunday Times in 1986. He was sentenced to 18 years in prison for treason.

A dozen Israeli antinuclear weapons activists, invited by Mahoul's Hadash party, sat in the gallery. One of

them, Gideon Spiro, said the government's ambiguity policy was wearing thin.

"The difference is that the same old lies are being told against the background of more transparency from the point of view of information that's available to us," he said.

The debate was raucous and bitter even by the standards of Israel's unruly parliament. It created a rare public split down ethnic lines, with Jews from almost all political backgrounds opposing the Arab members, though Barak's party often sides with the Arab members and counts on them for political support.

Arab lawmaker Ahmed Tibi said the Jews consider themselves Israeli patriots, but "they see us as traitors." Arabs make up about 16 percent of Israel's citizens.

Senate approves bill to raise minimum wage

The current \$5.15 hourly wage likely to rise before Election Day.

WASHINGTON (AP) — Teeing up for an election-year fight, the Senate approved a Republican bill Wednesday that would boost the minimum wage by \$1 an hour over three years, a period of time President Clinton and Democrats say is too long to wait.

With many Republicans — especially in the House — eager to avoid repeated campaign-season attacks on the widely popular issue, some increase in the current \$5.15 hourly minimum seems likely to become law before Election Day.

But with the White House and Democrats also objecting to the measure's \$18 billion in tax cuts over five years — mostly for small business owners — it is unclear what the final version will look like.

The GOP's desire to avoid making the proposal a campaign issue gives

Democrats little incentive to quickly settle for anything less than what they want: a two-year phase-in, with a much smaller tax package.

The minimum wage boost was included in a bill that would overhaul the nation's bankruptcy laws that the Senate approved by 83-14.

The House approved its own version of the bankruptcy legislation last May, but it lacked any minimum wage provisions.

Last November, the House Ways and Means Committee approved a separate GOP bill that would increase the minimum wage by \$1 over three years and includes a \$30 billion, five-year package of tax cuts. Some \$16 billion of that price tag is a reduction in the estate tax paid by upper-income people who inherit substantial assets.

But the fate of the House legislation is unclear.

With defections likely by moderate Republicans from urban, northeastern districts, GOP leaders so far lack the votes to move their version of the bill through the House.

World and Nation

Datelines

■ New Jersey

Investigators believe Seton fire set deliberately

NEWARK, N.J. (AP) — Investigators of the deadly Seton Hall University dormitory fire believe the blaze was deliberately set, The Star-Ledger of Newark reported Wednesday.

Authorities have identified at least four suspects in the Jan. 19 fire that killed three freshmen, the newspaper reported, citing law enforcement sources it did not name. No charges have been filed.

The investigators believe the incident may have resulted from a feud between a group of students and some non-students who were visiting the building on the night of the blaze, the newspaper reported. But they have not concluded whether the third-floor lounge fire was started as a prank or an attempt to harm someone.

The smoky predawn blaze injured about 60 people and forced a chaotic evacuation by hundreds of others.

■ Russia

Albright fails to make headway with Putin

MOSCOW (AP) — In the highest-level U.S. contact with Russia's new leader, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright failed to persuade Vladimir Putin during three hours of debate Wednesday to pull back in Chechnya.

"I don't think we are any closer to a political solution on Chechnya," Albright said after the Kremlin meeting, originally scheduled for about 60 minutes. "Neither of us minced words."

She complimented Putin as a Russian patriot with a "problem-solving approach," while expressing frustration at her inability to convince the former security service chief that the blitz in Chechnya was isolating Russia diplomatically.

For his part, Putin said at a picture-taking session that "the United States is putting certain pressures on Russia," but that he remained committed to his policies.

■ Washington

Senate vote doesn't need Gore's tie breaker

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate voted Wednesday to prevent people who violated laws protecting abortion clinics from escaping fines or civil judgments against them.

Republicans abandoned their vigorous opposition to the Democratic proposal after Democrats summoned Vice President Al Gore from the presidential campaign trail to break a possible tie vote.

But the 80-17 roll call denied Gore a chance to vote on the measure as president of the Senate, as well as a needed opportunity to reaffirm his pro-choice credentials.

Former Sen. Bill Bradley, opposing Gore for the Democratic presidential nomination, has questioned Gore's commitment to protecting women's right to choose abortion.

■ New York

Super Bowl pushes ABC ahead in ratings

NEW YORK (AP) — A super week put ABC ahead of its rivals for bragging rights as the season's most-watched television network — probably for good.

ABC crushed its competition last week behind Sunday's competitive Super Bowl game between the St. Louis Rams and Tennessee Titans and another record-setting performance by "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire."

WEATHER

TODAY

Partly cloudy
high 45, low 23

TOMORROW

Fair
high 34, low 18

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The Daily Nebraskan (USPS 144-080) is published by the UNL Publications Board, Nebraska Union 20, 1400 R St., Lincoln, NE 68588-0448, Monday through Friday during the academic year, weekly during the summer sessions. The public has access to the Publications Board. Readers are encouraged to submit story ideas and comments to the Daily Nebraskan by calling (402) 472-2588.

Subscriptions are \$60 for one year.

Postmaster: Send address changes to the Daily Nebraskan, Nebraska Union 20, 1400 R St., Lincoln, NE 68588-0448. Periodical postage paid at Lincoln, NE.

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