FEATURE

China Eastern crash:

US transport safety board helping download black box data from cockpit

Owen Churchill

- US helping China's investigation into the Flight 5735 disaster by downloading the data from the cockpit voice recorder
- American investigators have also left for China to assist in the crash probe and will operate in a strict Covid bubble
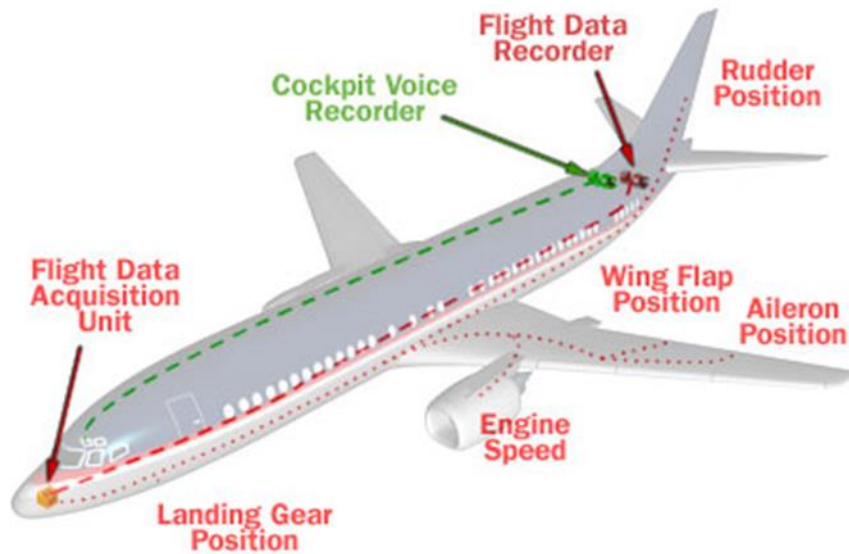
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Rescuers carry a piece of plane wreckage from the China Eastern flight crash site on March 25. Photo: Xinhua via AP

The US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) has been tasked with downloading cockpit voice recorder data recovered from the China Eastern Airlines flight that crashed in southern China last month.

"NTSB investigators are assisting the Civil Aviation Administration of China with the download of the cockpit voice recorder from China Eastern Flight 5735 in our lab in Washington," an NTSB representative said in a statement on Friday.

The move, first reported by Reuters, comes almost two weeks after flight MU5735 crashed into a forested hillside after plummeting suddenly from cruise altitude of around 8,900 metres (29,100 feet). None of the 132 people on board the Boeing 737-800 survived.

The cockpit voice recorder, which captures conversations between pilots and other audio clues from within the cockpit, was recovered two days after the crash.

A second "black box" that captures flight data, including pilot inputs and plane performance, was found on Sunday.

DNA tests confirm identities of all China Eastern Airlines crash victims
28 Mar 2022

It can take days or even weeks to analyze data recovered from the black boxes of crashed aircraft. The NTSB representative said that any information from the investigation would be released by China.

They referred further questions – including why the NTSB was handling the cockpit voice recorder data rather than Chinese investigators – to the Civil Aviation Administration of China, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

A CAAC official said last week that the recording material from the black box appeared to have survived the crash relatively unscathed. Investigators in Beijing were reported by state media to have already begun their own efforts to extract the data.

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All 132 people on board China Eastern Air crash confirmed dead as second black box recovered

In line with international agreements, the NTSB was invited to participate in the investigation since the plane was manufactured by an American company. Boeing and engine-maker CFM International are also taking part.

The NTSB has also dispatched officials to travel to China. The body revealed on Friday that those investigators would operate within an effective Covid-19 bubble, skirting China's strict quarantine requirements for overseas visitors.

The Civil Aviation Administration of China said the team, comprising seven experts, arrived China on Saturday.

"Investigators will limit interactions with those outside of [the] investigation similar to safety protocols at Beijing Olympics, which will allow them to begin work immediately without a quarantine," the NTSB posted on Twitter.

The collaborative effort comes as competition and confrontation continue to define most elements of US-China ties.
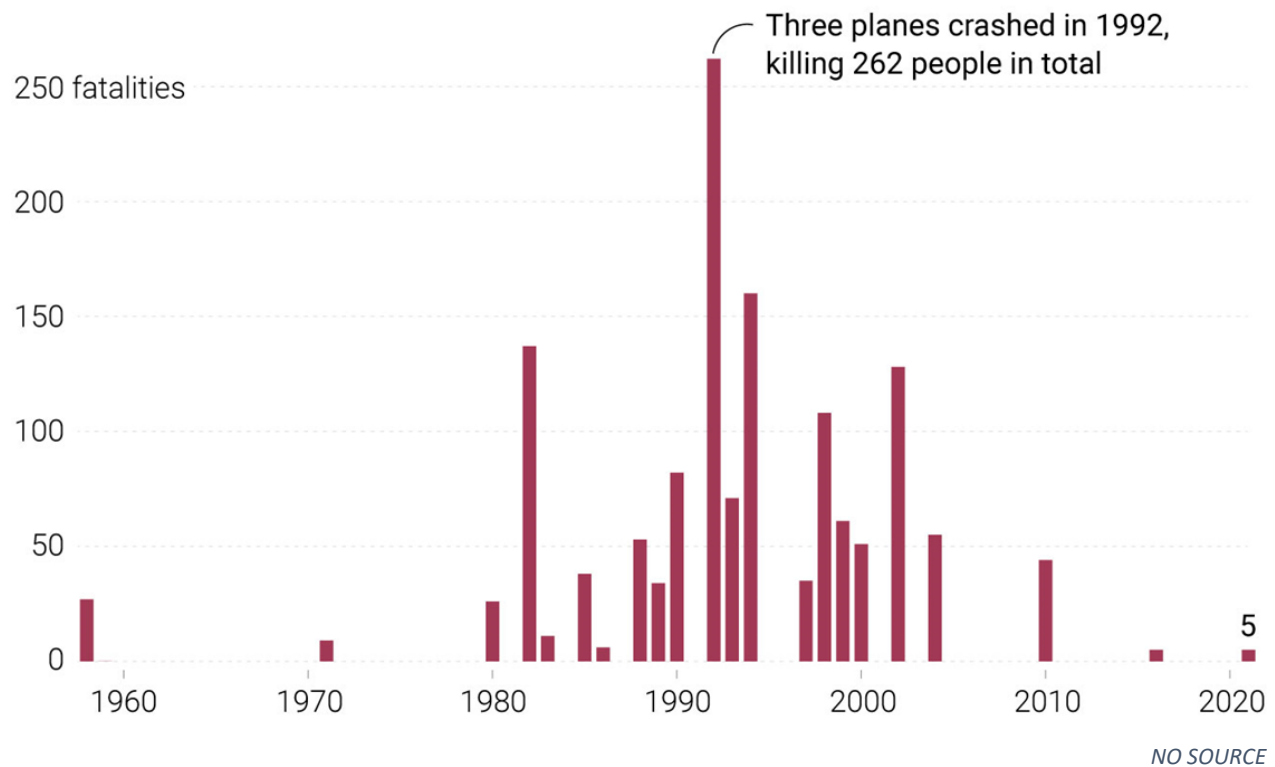
A priority for investigators is to determine why the plane suddenly entered a steep descent while flying at cruise altitude in good weather and following normal interactions with air traffic control.

China Eastern Airlines crash: hopes lost, compensation process begins
25 Mar 2022

Flight tracking data released by Flightradar24 indicated that the plane briefly regained some altitude at around 2,250 metres, before re-entering a downward dive. Video

Three planes crashed in 1992, killing 262 people in total

250 fatalities

200

150

100

50

0

1960   1970   1980   1990   2000   2010   2020

5

captured by a surveillance camera at a nearby mine appeared to show it was nearly vertical in the final few seconds before it crashed.

The CAAC said this week it had used DNA analysis to identify the remains of all 123 passengers and nine crew members. The death toll makes the crash China's deadliest air incident in almost three decades.

Officials said on Thursday that the search of the impact area was complete, having recovered more than 40,000 pieces of debris.

A long, thin strip of metal recovered 10km (6 miles) away from the primary crash site raised questions as to whether the plane suffered some kind of partial break-up either before or during its descent. The plane was likely to have reached speeds airliners are not typically designed to withstand.

Zhu Tao, the CAAC's aviation safety chief, said on Thursday that an initial report into the accident would be completed within 30 days of the incident, in line with the Chicago Convention on International Civil Aviation and Chinese aviation regulations.

Owen Churchill

Owen joined the Post in 2018 after several years working as a reporter and editor in China. He covers US-China relations, human rights, and China's influence overseas. A co-founder of the Shanghai-based news outlet Sixth Tone, he is an alumnus of SOAS in London and Fudan University in Shanghai.