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Air France Victim's Body Recovered From Atlantic After Two Years on Seabed

By Laurence Frost and Andrea Rothman - May 5, 2011

Underwater salvage teams retrieved a body from the wreck of the Air [France](#) Airbus that crashed into the Atlantic two years ago as they seek to collect more evidence to help explain the worst disaster in the airline's history.

Investigators took a tissue sample for DNA analysis, French police said today. The sample will be sent to Paris with the flight recorders to determine whether the victim can be identified, according to an e-mailed police statement.

The recovery of bodies from the crash site, which lies beneath 3,900 meters (12,800 feet) of water, began after robots found the two flight recorders that store data and cockpit voices that may explain the accident. All 228 people aboard the Airbus SAS A330 were killed when the jet plunged into the ocean on June 1, 2009, en route to Paris from [Rio de Janeiro](#). Bringing up bodies has stirred controversy among the victims' families.

The families are "very divided" about lifting bodies from the wreck, said Alain Jakubowicz, an attorney who represents the relatives of 70 victims of flight AF447. "There are a lot of technical challenges, this has never been done."

The bodies of 51 of the dead, including the flight captain, were recovered from the sea in the weeks following the crash. The operation to recover the first corpse was "particularly complicated" and succeeded only on the second attempt, the statement said.

Poor Condition

The body was raised along with the aircraft seat it was attached to and appeared in poor condition, police said. A decision has yet to be taken on the recovery of more bodies, and "very strong uncertainties remain" about its feasibility, according to the French police statement.

If investigators hope to glean clues about how the plane struck the water, more bodies may have to be recovered, said Derrick Pounder, a forensic pathologist professor at [Scotland's](#) Dundee University who has worked on other air accidents.

“On a scientific level, I don’t think it’s helpful to recover one body to interpret what happened,” Pounder said. “It’s the pattern of injuries to all passengers that is used to make the interpretation.”

While automated radio transmissions from the plane suggested its airspeed sensors failed in bad weather, triggering a series of system breakdowns in the minutes before the crash, France’s BEA air accident investigator says the precise chain of events cannot be understood without more information. After submersion in seawater for two years, there is no assurance the data in the flight recorders can still be fully retrieved.

Lack of Oxygen

Among the victims of the accident were 58 passengers from [Brazil](#), 61 from France, 26 from [Germany](#), and other nationalities including travelers from [China](#), [South Korea](#) and the U.S. The cold salt water and lack of oxygen and light at the depth of the wreck probably helped preserve the bodies, according to members of the salvage team.

The bodies are likely “reasonably well preserved,” said Pounder, the Dundee University professor. The pressure of the water will have forced out all air from the body and that, together with the cold, would stop the action of bacteria that cause bodies to decay, he said

The recovery work is being carried out by an unmanned submarine equipped with high-resolution cameras and two robotic arms, operated by underwater engineering company Phoenix International Holdings Inc. The basket on the sub can lift a load of 200 kilograms (440 pounds).

Manslaughter Charges

The BEA, which is heading the crash inquiry, said last month that decisions on the recovery of victims’ bodies would be taken by legal authorities. Airbus, the plane’s manufacturer, and Air France, [Europe](#)’s largest airline, are facing manslaughter charges in relation to the accident.

Bodies have been raised from the sea after previous air accidents, although never from such depths. The U.S. National Transportation Safety Board recovered all victims from TWA flight 800, which crashed off [Long Island](#) in 1996, and from EgyptAir 990, which went down 60 miles from Nantucket in 1999.

Following retrieval of the flight recorders, investigators still plan to pull up several dozen pieces of the wreckage to help study the accident, BEA President Jean-Paul Troadec said in a May 3 interview. Photos released to the public show parts of the landing gear and the fuselage with window sections.

Should the corpses ultimately remain at the bottom of the Atlantic, families and friends of the deceased may struggle more to come to terms with their loss, said Robert Jensen, the chief executive officer of Kenyon International Emergency Services, a Houston-based company that helps airlines handle accidents and assists in earthquakes and tsunamis.

"Their life doesn't move on," Jensen said. "It stays as it was from the night of the plane crash. The best practice seems to be recovery."

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