

Obscure Noises Heard on China Airlines Tape

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TAIPEI, Taiwan, June 23 -- The cockpit voice recorder in the China Airlines Boeing 747 that crashed last month recorded a dozen faint, mysterious noises in the 13 minutes before the plane broke into four pieces at 30,000 feet and plunged into the Taiwan Strait, crash investigators said here today. Kay Yong, the managing director of the Aviation Safety Council, the government agency conducting the investigation, declined to discuss what clues the noises might hold to the cause of the crash, though, and cautioned that it was unclear whether the sounds were related to the crash. The air disaster, which killed all 225 people aboard, has captured the attention of air safety experts around the world because it is very unusual for a jumbo jet to come apart in midflight. Two Taiwanese safety investigators, two China Airlines pilots, a Boeing official and a Federal Aviation Administration official from the United States have all listened to the mysterious sounds and have been stumped about what they were, Mr. Yong said, adding that, "They decided those are not the sounds from a normal cockpit." Amplifying the tape tenfold, investigators heard seven thumping sounds between 13 and 9 minutes before the plane came apart, Mr. Yong said. The sounds came close to resembling a human heartbeat, but probably were not, investigators said. There were four more slightly different sounds between seven and three minutes before the crash, and finally a last, faint thud a second before the recording ended, Mr. Yong said. The thud did not match any of the previous noises. All conversation among members of the flight crew was completely normal throughout the duration of the recording, Mr. Yong said. If the pilot, co-pilot or flight engineer heard any of the unusual noises, he said in a telephone interview after a news conference here today, "they certainly did not talk about it." The safety agency will perform computer analyses of the mysterious sounds, and has separately begun analyzing the contents of the aircraft's flight data recorder, Mr. Yong said. The safety council has scheduled a news conference for Tuesday to release those results. Other aviation safety experts said that if the series of noises was related to the crash, the noises would be further evidence that the aircraft was probably not destroyed by an errant missile or a bomb -- possibilities already discounted by investigators -- and more likely crashed because of some mechanical problem. "To the extent that it excludes other possibilities, it inevitably raises the likelihood that some physical or mechanical failure led to the catastrophe," said Arnold Barnett, an aviation safety specialist and statistician at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who is a co-director of the Sloan Foundation's Global Aviation Project. Another midflight breakup of a Boeing 747 occurred six years ago when T.W.A. Flight 800 exploded off the coast of Long Island. American investigators subsequently decided that the probable cause was a fuel tank explosion. There was no warning of the explosion on the cockpit recording then. China Airlines, the majority of which is owned by a government foundation, and Boeing both declined to comment today on the cockpit recording. Taiwanese radar showed that the China Airlines flight broke into four pieces 20 minutes after takeoff on a flight from Taipei to Hong Kong on the afternoon of May 25. The plane came apart in good weather with no distress call from the pilots and fell into water 200 feet deep about a third of the way across the

Taiwan Strait from southern Taiwan to mainland China. Search teams have found 160 bodies so far. President Chen Shui-bian of Taiwan assured angry relatives on Saturday that the search for bodies would continue. From passing planes, a small flotilla of ships could be seen at the crash site this evening. The cockpit voice recorder was recovered from the sea floor only on Tuesday, and the flight data recorder a day later. Rough seas, strong currents and murky water had prevented divers from reaching the wreckage earlier. Both so-called black boxes are in fairly good condition, crash investigators said.

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