

New ship to search for MH370

KUALA LUMPUR: A high-tech vessel run by a US exploration firm is en route to resume the hunt for Flight MH370 in a new bid to solve one of aviation's greatest mysteries. The Malaysia Airlines jet disappeared with 239 people on board in March 2014 en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing after diverting from its flight path.

No sign of the plane was found in a 120,000sq km zone selected by satellite analysis of the jet's likely trajectory and the Australian-led hunt – the largest in aviation history – was called off in January last year. But it looks set to resume soon.

Research vessel Seabed Constructor, leased by exploration firm Ocean Infinity, has set off from South Africa for the Indian Ocean with the aim of arriving in the search zone by mid-January, a source familiar with the matter said. It is hoped by this time the Malaysian Government and Ocean Infinity would have finalised a deal for the hunt to resume.

Deputy Transport Minister Datuk Abdul Aziz Kaprawi said negotiations for the firm to restart the hunt on a "no find, no fee" basis were in the final stages. "They (Ocean Infinity) know we are very serious in taking up their offer," he told AFP.

A spokesman for the company added: "The company is awaiting final contract award before the search recommences." Ocean Infinity was one of three companies which had bid to resume the hunt.

The source, who declined to be identified, said that the firm had decided to send the Seabed Constructor, a Norwegian research vessel, to the southern Indian Ocean so that it was ready to start searching in a window of good weather expected in January and February.

The vessel is carrying several autonomous submarines which can be launched from the boat to scour the seabed for fragments of the jet. Australia's national science body CSIRO released a report in April suggesting the doomed plane was "most likely" north of the former search zone in an area of about 25,000sq km.

Only three confirmed fragments of MH370 have been found, all of them on western Indian Ocean shores, including a 2m wing part known as a flaperon. Meanwhile, Transport Minister Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai said an announcement about the search would be made next week. "We are making preparations and we will announce it after we finalise the contract," he said when met at the Barisan Nasional supreme council meeting at Putra World Trade Centre here.

He added the decision had been made with the agreement of China and Australia. Liow declined to comment about the cost of the search if the plane was found.