

'Never jump to conclusions' on tragedy's cause

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THE INVESTIGATION into the loss of Air France's flight 447 may take years and involve hundreds of people, but it's the only way to find out what happened.

"Never jump to conclusions," said South African pilot Captain Gavin McKellar.

"The story will unfold, slowly, slowly."

McKellar, chairman of the accident analysis and prevention committee of the International Federation of Airline Pilots Associations, said the probe would take a long time and that investigators would work on facts, not speculation.

McKellar called the Airbus 330 a very safe and extremely well-designed aircraft.

"We're very keen to know what happened," he said.

Speculation is that it was brought down by extreme turbulence from a tropical storm.

Yesterday, Reuters reported that investigators had found another four debris fields, 90km from the first one.

This could indicate the plane broke up in the air.

McKellar said pilots would take detours of "hundreds of miles" to avoid turbulence visible on radar, but not all turbulence was visible.

McKellar was also involved in the investigation into the crash 22 years ago of SAA's flight 295, a Boeing 747.

The Helderberg crashed into the Indian Ocean off Mauritius in October 1987 after a fire, killing all 159 people on board. The fire was widely believed to have been caused by illicit cargo.

Like the Air France plane, the Helderberg crashed apparently without sending a distress signal.

McKellar said Helderberg investigators found two separate debris fields on the seabed, indicating it broke up in the air.

Investigators used a side-scan sonar, towed from a ship, to locate the wreckage and picked up the image of the plane's tailfin first. "It took ages," he said.

After a long search, they retrieved one of the black boxes, the cockpit voice recorder.

Sapa-AFP reported yesterday that the recovery of the Helderberg's voice recorder at about 4.5km is still the record for a recovery at sea.

McKellar said Helderberg investigators had used a robotic vehicle to get to the wreckage, take video footage and pick up pieces of the wreckage.

US-based disaster recovery company Kenyon International Emergency Services said such investigations are extremely complicated.

Kenyon International CEO Robert Jensen told The Star from Houston, Texas, that investigators must first get to the scene, then start mapping where debris is. "They'll painstakingly work from a grid," he said.

They would probably use a specialised ship and remote-operated vehicle as it is too deep for divers.

Debris pieces would be checked for indications of fire or explosions. Items recovered would be taken to a huge warehouse, where investigators would try to reassemble the aircraft.

