

Achieve secure borders through dedication, not tragedy

The disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 has highlighted the need for global systematic use of INTERPOL's database of stolen and lost travel documents

By Ronald Noble, secretary general, INTERPOL

The disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 left many in disbelief that with the advanced technology and safeguards that exist, an airplane carrying 227 passengers and 12 crew members could disappear into thin air. When it took off in the early hours of 8 March, no one could have imagined the hysteria that would follow, or the pain that hundreds of families would soon have to endure. From day one, there were simply more questions than answers: how was it possible that contact could have been lost? Why were the emergency signals not activated? What was the reason for the disappearance: was it a malfunction, intentional hijacking or terrorism?

The importance of screening

While the coordinated, multi-country search and international investigation are gradually providing some answers, certain questions could have been avoided in the first place. One, which for days shifted the focus away from finding the plane, is how two Iranian nationals travelling with authentic Iranian passports were able to board flight MH370 using stolen Italian and Austrian passports.

If these passports had been screened against INTERPOL's stolen and lost travel documents (SLTD) database, authorities would have seen these passports listed as stolen. The question would never have needed to be asked, and the families of those on flight MH370 would be one step closer to the closure they deserve. Instead, the passports were not screened, and speculation in the media ran rampant, fuelling debate on the fate of the flight, the motivation behind it and the state of aviation security globally.

Since it was created in 2002, the SLTD database has grown from a few thousand passports and searches to more than 40 million records and 800 million searches per year, resulting in more than 60,000 hits. While this growth is an impressive indicator of its importance, it is history that tells the more powerful tale. The story is of how SLTD could have stopped Ramzi Yousef from entering the United States on a stolen Iraqi passport, which he did before perpetrating

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the first World Trade Center attack in 1993; or how it could have prevented Milorad Ulemek, who crossed borders 26 times using a stolen passport, from assassinating Serbian prime minister Zoran Djindjic in 2003.

What these stories, and that of the MH370 case, demonstrate is that SLTD may have 40 million records and 800 million searches, but it is that one record that is not shared or that one search that is not conducted that could make all the difference.

Standardised reporting and review

INTERPOL is the first to recognise how little these big numbers matter, and that it is about each and every record and search. This is why from the start our only goal has been to promote standardised reporting and review

of SLTD records, and the global systematic screening of SLTD by our 190 member countries at all border crossings. For us, it is about achieving certainty that no one, anywhere, could travel across borders with a stolen or lost travel document and put lives at risk. However, when the two passengers stepped onto MH370 using stolen passports, they revealed to the world just how far we are from this certainty: an average of four out of every 10 international passengers are still not screened against the SLTD database and, of those who are screened, only a handful of countries are responsible.

Using a stolen or lost passport

While no country can sit idly by and afford to accept this reality, governments should not be the only ones responsible for this burden. Across the world today, the budgets of law enforcement and border security are dwindling, with expectations only increasing. However, the threats they protect people from also affect industries and markets, which are often victims as well as being in a position to act. This is why INTERPOL is in the early stages of implementing a new model where information shared internationally by police can reach private sector entities, such as airlines, that can help law enforcement and border security identify and stop criminals and terrorists from exploiting security gaps. For example, in the near future, SLTD will not only prevent someone from boarding a plane using a stolen or lost passport, but, in partnership with airlines, will also ensure that person will not even be able to buy a ticket.

Tragedy should never be the galvanising force that drives the global community towards action. Yet the lessons learned from MH370 may soon fade into the past, along with the political will that is now demanding INTERPOL work harder to assist its members to secure their borders.

While it must act now, INTERPOL cannot do it alone. The G7/8 is a critical partner, whose support is required in order to turn the momentum for an effective global screening regime into sustained action that will bring such a regime about. It is about creating safer skies together that will benefit all, and stronger mechanisms to protect borders and citizens, bringing us all one step closer to a safer world. ■

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