

For now, spies downplay French jet bomb scenario

Sat Jun 6, 2009 8:05am EDT

By **William Maclean**, Security Correspondent

LONDON (Reuters) - Intelligence services and security analysts who monitor extremist groups see nothing as yet to indicate foul play in the crash of Air France flight 447.

Security experts say the lack of a claim of responsibility and the absence of website chatter by guerrilla networks are pointers, albeit circumstantial ones, to an accident as the likely cause of the crash that killed 228 people.

"An attack is not the top theory at the moment," said Anthony Glee, director of Britain's Buckingham University Center for Security and Intelligence Studies.

One Western security source who declined to be identified because he was not authorized to speak to the media said without elaborating the crash was being handled so far as an accident.

Authorities are baffled by how a modern plane could have plunged out of the sky without giving its team of three experienced pilots time to send a mayday call.

"The feeling is strange. A lot of people feel terrorism cannot be ruled out, but we have nothing to support this point," said **Claude Moniquet of the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center, a think tank in Brussels.**

Air France and government ministers have said bad weather and turbulence were probably behind the disaster on the flight from Rio de Janeiro to Paris, but have refused to rule out other causes, including terrorism.

Speculation about a bomb stems from news that Air France received an anonymous telephone warning a bomb was on a flight leaving Buenos Aires on May 27, four days before the crash.

A spokesman said the plane was checked, no bomb was found and the aircraft left an hour and a half late. He added that such alerts were relatively common.

A source at the Aeronautic Security Police in Argentina told Reuters French authorities have not asked for any additional information about the May 27 bomb threat.

A judge was assigned to a routine investigation of the bomb threat after it happened. A source at the court handling the probe said there had so far been no results from efforts to trace the phone call in which the bomb threat was made.

The sources said an anonymous male caller phoned a downtown office of Air France in Buenos Aires, not the company's office at the airport, in the morning of May 27, and asked about the time of departure of an Air France flight. Then said "There is a bomb on that airplane" and hung up.

Security analysts believe intelligence agencies monitoring websites on the Internet and intercepting telephone calls would have picked up some chatter about the incident among groups or networks like al Qaeda, if such organizations were responsible.

Websites used by al Qaeda-affiliated groups and monitored by Reuters journalists have published no messages on the topic.

Moniquet said his think tank "found nothing" on extremist websites. The Site Intelligence Group, a U.S.-based terrorism monitor, says it had also seen "nothing of interest."

A claim of responsibility, whether spurious or genuine, is the norm following the criminal downing of an airliner.

Philip Baum of Aviation Security International said lack of a claim of responsibility did not equate to lack of foul play.

"But it would be extremely unusual for there to have been no specific threat against that aircraft beforehand or that route in general. And then to have no claim in the immediate aftermath of the attack, that tends to reduce the likelihood of foul play."

"The bottom line is we have to get to that wreckage," said Chris Yates of Jane's Aviation. "If we're talking about an explosive device, then even if the wreckage has been immersed in water for a considerable time there will still be physical evidence to show what it was." (Additional reporting by Damian Wroclavsky in Buenos Aires, Kerstin Gehmlich in Berlin, Crispian Balmer in Paris, Deborah Charles in Washington) (Editing by Philippa Fletcher)