

'Difficulty is universal'

REMOTE SENSING:

Agency staff scanning vast areas of open sea

KUALA LUMPUR

For the last few days, a group of men and women have been straining their eyes to detect any signs of the missing flight MH370 at the Malaysian Remote Sensing Agency (ARSM).

The agency, which most times would deal with satellite images related to forestry and fisheries among others, has put its work aside to focus on the search for the missing plane.

They had been hunching over their computer screens ever since the plane was lost. To date, they had scanned hundreds of thousands of kilometres of open sea and sifted through countless gigabytes worth of imagery data.

"It's not easy," said the agency's direct-

or-general, Datuk Darus Ahmad.

"If the plane has broken up, then it would be hard to identify. Only if it's in one piece, would it be easily recognisable,

"We get our images from the SPOT-6, Radarsat-2 and Landsat-8 satellites."

The Spot-6 satellite has the highest resolution of 1.5-metre resolution. It is still a far cry from images found in Google Earth.

In some urban areas for example — it had a resolution as high as 0.1m.

However, Google Earth images are not relevant for the search because the majority of their images are weeks or months old.

Up to now, the agency detected two suspicious-looking objects. These objects, measuring 27 metres, by 30 metres and 70 metres by 40 metres had been forwarded to the search and rescue (SAR) operation currently led by the Transport Ministry.

The ARSM team were trained to identify objects, such as boats, in the ocean.

Despite this, it is an uphill task to identify anything resembling a plane.

"The difficulty is universal," said Darus.

The satellite images were received directly

at the Temerloh ground station as well as from the satellite providers via File Transfer Protocol.

Once the images were downloaded from the satellites and reached the ARSM offices, the painstaking work of finding any object that may resemble aircraft debris begins.

The ARSM currently has 10 people scrutinising the maps, including Darus himself.

The team had covered 123,000km of the South China Sea and also covered an additional 185km by 185km swath of land area all the way to the Temenggor Dam.

On Thursday night, the agency received an additional 20GB of data representing some 100,000 km of new search area — to reflect the new information the SAR team had received.

All three satellites orbit on a polar orbit, which meant they crossed over or near the Earth's poles.

Currently, the Spot-6 satellite would provide images once every day between March 10 and March 14, While, the Radarsat and Landsat-8 satellites would provide images once every three days and once every 16 days, respectively.

Darus said the close relationship that the agency had with the satellite providers in the past had enabled them to procure the images.

