



ROBYN IRONSIDE

FOUR seconds was all it took to bring down MH17 and end 298 lives.

That was the gap between the last communication with the Malaysia Airlines flight and the abrupt end of the flight data recording.

There was no hint anyone knew what was happening.

A preliminary report by the Dutch Safety Board has found the Boeing 777 broke into pieces mid-flight after being pierced by high-speed objects.

According to the 34-page report, the final communication with the crew came at 13:19:59 on July 17 (Ukraine time). Subsequent transmissions from the control centre got no response.

The report notes there were no technical or operational problems found with the aircraft, and that no distress messages were received by Air Traffic Control. "The last radio transmission made by the crew started at 13:19:56 and ended at 13:19:59," said the report.

Both the cockpit voice recorder and flight data recorder ended abruptly at 13:20:03.

There was no evidence the recorders, which had been sent to Moscow, were manipulated.

The report said debris from the Boeing 777, which was spread over hundreds of metres, indicated that the aircraft broke up in the air.

"The damage observed in the forward section of the aircraft appears to indicate that the aircraft was penetrated by a large number of high-energy objects from outside the aircraft," read the report.

"It is likely (this led) to an in-flight break-up."

Three other commercial aircraft were flying in the same control area as MH17, the closest being just 30km away.

Investigators were unable to access the crash site in eastern Ukraine because their safety could not be guaranteed.

But they were able to download valid flight data from black boxes, along with information from air traffic control, satellite and radar images and photos from the scene. Experts

FINDINGS

■ External impact from many high-energy objects

■ Mid-air break-up

■ No technical or operational problems with plane or crew

■ Flight data and cockpit voice black boxes cut off at 13:20:03, four seconds after last contact

■ No malfunctions or warnings on flight data recorder.

■ No hint of malfunction or emergency in crew discussion

■ No distress messages

■ Plane was airworthy on departure

■ Crew properly licensed and with valid medical certificates

from Australia, the UK, Germany, Malaysia, the Ukraine and Russia are assisting The Netherlands with the case.

Last night Prime Minister Tony Abbott welcomed the findings and said they made it clear the tragic downing "was not due to aircraft malfunction or pilot error".

"The findings are consistent with the Government's statement that MH17 was shot down by a large surface-to-air missile," Mr Abbott said.

"The international community must remain focused on finding, prosecuting and punishing the perpetrators of this cowardly attack.

"We owe this to the innocent victims of the MH17 downing and their families."

"The report confirms that MH17 was flying in unrestricted airspace under the control of local air traffic controllers, and following a route and altitude cleared by air traffic control," Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak said.

Victims' families got access to the preliminary report, an hour before it was published.

Pro-Russian separatists have consistently been blamed. robyn.ironside@news.com.au