

MH370 search vessel returns to port

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SYDNEY: The ship involved in the recently halted hunt for Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 returned to port in western Australia, where officials from the countries that funded the fruitless search gathered to thank them and to defend their decision to end the hunt despite recommendations from investigators that it continue.

Transport officials from Australia, Malaysia and China met in the Western Australia state capital of Perth to greet the crew of *Fugro Equator*, who were ordered to return last week after the countries officially suspended the nearly three-year search for the plane in the Indian Ocean.

The US\$160mil (RM710mil) deep-sea sonar search off Australia's west

coast failed to find any trace of the plane, which vanished March 8, 2014, on a flight from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing.

But Australian Transport Minister Darren Chester denied that the effort had been a failure, saying crews had managed to eliminate the 120,000-sq km search zone as a possible crash site.

Several relatives of the 239 people on board the plane have fiercely criticised the decision to end the search before finding their loved ones, and called on officials to scour a new 25,000-sq km area immediately to the north of the old search zone that a group of international investigators recently identified as the likeliest resting place of the wreckage.

The investigators calculated the possible new crash site by reanalysing satellite data that tracked the plane's movements and looking at a new drift analysis of debris that has washed ashore on coastlines throughout the Indian Ocean.

The experts recommended in a report released last month by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau that the new area be searched.

On Monday, the bureau's chief commissioner expressed confidence that the plane probably lies in that new zone.

"It's highly likely that the area now defined by the experts contains the aircraft but that's not absolutely for certain," Greg Hood told reporters. — AP