

# Malaysian Plane Contained Over 100 Int'l AIDS Conf. Attendees

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Researchers, activists, and scientists were all headed to Australia when their plane was reportedly shot down over Ukraine.

Reports indicate at least 108 people on the doomed Malaysia Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur were headed to Sunday's 20th International AIDS Conference in Melbourne. That would be about one-third of the 298 passengers aboard the plane.

Australian media reported the grim news, which is now being **picked up by American media**. AIDS Conference attendees on Flight MH17 were headed to Melbourne; the flight continued from Kuala Lumpur to Perth, Australia, where they were going to connect to Melbourne. One of the most prominent attendees was **Joep Lange**, who heads the Department of Global Health at the University of Amsterdam and served as a former president of the International AIDS Society. Lange had worked to combat HIV since the earliest days of the disease, helping advance antiretrovirals and slow mother-to-child transmission.

National Minority AIDS Council Deputy Executive Director Daniel C. Montoya responded this morning saying that NMAC's "entire extended family... are absolutely devastated by reports that among the nearly 300 souls so tragically lost on Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, were more than 100 researchers, advocates, health workers and people living with HIV bound for the International AIDS Conference" including Lange. "While Dr. Lange's may be the most recognizable name among those that we lost, it does not make the others...any less difficult to bear. The HIV/AIDS community, while spread out around the globe operates like a tight-knit family, regularly looking to each other for the support that we're so often denied by our institutions at home. Because of this, the loss of so much of our family at once is indescribable. Our thoughts and prayers go out to the surviving family, friends and colleagues of all those who perished. While the pain felt by all of us today will undoubtedly stay with us for years to come, so too will the legacy and contributions made by those that we have lost to ending this epidemic."

The names of those on board are just now coming out. **Glenn Raymond Thomas**, a press officer with the World Health Organization and a former journalist with the BBC, was on board according to the WHO. The Dutch media reported that **Pim de Kuijer** from Stop AIDSNow and AIDS Fund Netherlands was also onboard. The exact number of people heading to the IAS on the plane is not known, though. While early media reports said 100 and 108, the IAS can only confirm seven names so far.

Organizers of the AIDS Conference released a statement that said, in part, "At this incredibly sad and sensitive time the [International AIDS Society] stands with our international family and sends condolences to the loved ones of those who have been lost to this tragedy."

The Human Rights Campaign also issued a statement: "HRC wishes to extend our condolences to the friends and families of everyone aboard Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17. We are deeply saddened to learn about the deaths of the many HIV/AIDS advocates believed to be on the plane. HRC joins the international community in mourning the loss of all those who lost their lives today, including such dedicated health professionals. They will be sorely missed."

At the conference, HIV activists and researchers have been frantically texting colleagues to see who is still unaccounted for, all while trying to move on with what was planned. TheBody.com's editorial director Myles Helfand wrote from Melbourne today, "I don't think the reality has sunk in yet for many of us here. It's too fresh, too unreal." He says that community members are used to the specter of death, from AIDS complications, not this. But he concludes, "But we will do what we always do when we lose people in the fight against HIV: We'll hurt, and we'll mourn, and we'll remember. And we'll keep going, because even if HIV isn't aware of the fact, we've got a war to win against it."

