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Family of Americans killed in Air France crash sue

By JUAN A. LOZANO (AP)
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HOUSTON — The families of two Americans killed in the crash of an Air France flight off the coast of South America in June filed a lawsuit Wednesday claiming the airline and the plane's various manufacturers knew the aircraft had defective parts that could have caused the accident. The lawsuit was filed in Houston federal court by the families of Michael Harris, 60, and his wife Anne, 54. The Houston-area couple were two of the 228 people killed aboard Air France Flight 447 when it crashed en route from Brazil to France on June 1.

The lawsuit, which seeks unspecified damages, was filed against Societe Air France; Airbus, the plane's manufacturer; and Honeywell International Inc.; Rockwell Collins Inc.; and Thales SA, which manufactured various components related to radar equipment and other components that measure airspeed and altitude.

The cause of the crash is still being investigated and remains unclear. But attention has been focused on whether a type of speed sensor

known as a Pitot tube malfunctioned and sent false speed information to the computers as the plane ran into a thunderstorm at about 35,000 feet.

Automatic messages transmitted by the plane show its computer systems no longer knew its speed, and the automatic pilot and thrust functions were turned off.

"The focus of the lawsuit is the speed and sensor devices and the related components which we believe played a significant role in what happened to the aircraft," said Richard Mithoff, attorney for the two sons of the Harrises who filed the lawsuit. "It's pretty clear that a plane doesn't drop out of the sky either without the fault of the crew or equipment or both."

Mithoff said questions have surfaced about whether Air France was aware of problems with the speed sensing component parts and if the airlines took timely action to solve possible problems.

The Associated Press reported earlier this month that Airbus knew since at least 2002 about problems with the Pitots. Thales manufactured the Pitot tubes, Honeywell a unit that supplied air data, including airspeed and alti-

tude, and Rockwell the radar system. "We are aware of the lawsuit but we have no comment," said Airbus spokesman Clay McConnell.

Messages left with Air France officials in Paris, Thales offices in Paris and Arlington, Va., and spokespeople with New Jersey-based Honeywell and Iowa-based Rockwell were not immediately returned.

Investigators insist sensor malfunction was not the cause of the crash. But the exact role the Pitots played in the crash may never be known without the flight recorders, which might never be recovered.

The plane was flying from Rio de Janeiro to Paris when it went down in a remote area of the Atlantic, 930 miles off Brazil's mainland and far from radar coverage.

Michael Harris worked in Rio de Janeiro for Oklahoma City-based Devon Energy Corp. But he and his wife still maintained a home in the Houston suburb of The Woodlands, Mithoff said. The couple was heading to Europe for work and vacation.

Associated Press writer Angela Charlton in Paris contributed to this report.