

America fears India is covering up jet crash

By **Benedict Smith** US REPORTER

US OFFICIALS fear Indian authorities are trying to cover up the deadly Air India plane crash, which killed 260 people.

Just one passenger survived when Flight 171 crashed seconds after taking off from Ahmedabad in western India in June, killing 241 travellers and crew, along with 19 people on the ground.

US investigators believe the evidence points to Sumeet Sabharwal, the flight's captain, deliberately crashing the plane, *The Wall Street Journal* reported.

Data downloaded from the Boeing Dreamliner's black box allegedly shows someone inside the cockpit moved the switches to cut off the engine's fuel supply. The captain did not then attempt to raise the nose of the aircraft before the crash, the evidence reportedly shows.

Some US officials fear the Indian

government will seek to obstruct the findings and instead blame mechanical faults with the plane.

However, Indian observers believe the US is overlooking flaws in American-made planes, although no Boeing Dreamliner has ever suffered a fatal crash before.

India's top court this month said Sabharwal was not to blame for the disaster.

Sabharwal's father has said his son has been the target of a "character assassination" despite his "unblemished 30-year career" as a pilot.

The joint-investigation between India and the US, which is involved because the Boeing was manufactured in the US and approved by American safety regulators, has been marred by mutual suspicion between officials.

GVG Yugandhar, who leads India's aircraft accident investigation bureau, is said to have told US officials they were

"not a third world country" and "can do anything you all can do".

Indian authorities are accused of failing to prioritise gathering and analysing data from the black box, although this has been disputed by a figure familiar with India's investigation process.

American investigators were banned from taking photos of the wreckage, some of which was moved before they could examine it, sources said.

Two American black-box specialists who landed in New Delhi in June were warned not to accompany Indian authorities to a remote laboratory to analyse flight data and voice recorders from the cockpit.

Jennifer Homendy, the chairman of the US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), is said to have been worried about the safety of US personnel and equipment given the risk of terrorism or military conflict in the region.