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Parts of the landing gear of TWA Flight 800 lying on the floor of an aircraft hangar in Calverton, New York, in this photo issued by the FBI. The navy continues to retrieve parts of the plane from the ocean off Long Island.

French Hear U.S. Official Say Little New About Crash

By Craig R. Whitney
New York Times Service

PARIS — In a closed conference hall tense with frustration, about 170 European and American relatives of the 230 victims of the crash of Trans World Airlines Flight 800 met for three hours with the top U.S. investigator of the disaster. But many came away saying they had learned little more about what brought down the Boeing 747 jetliner 10 weeks ago.

"Our main preoccupation was to know the causes of the accident, and why and how our children died," Michelle Richter of Clermont-Ferrand, France, said after the meeting Saturday. Her daughters Noemie, 15, and Anne-Lyse, 17, died when the plane went down off Long Island en route from New York to Paris on July 17.

"We don't know any more or less today than we knew before," she said.

The investigator, Robert Francis, vice chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, met with the

families at the invitation of the French authorities, who were anxious to have him reassure relatives of the 42 French victims that everything possible was being done to determine what had caused their deaths. A former Federal Aviation Authority representative at the U.S. Embassy here, Mr. Francis speaks fluent French.

The French families, joined by Italian, Belgian and American relatives of other victims, then began a closed-door meeting to discuss forming an international association to help press for aggressive investigation of the crash and to represent families in any efforts to seek compensation.

French newspapers and magazines have at times suggested that U.S. officials knew more than they were telling and would not reveal the truth until after the U.S. presidential election in November, an accusation repeatedly denied by officials involved in the investigation.

But if the French families here Saturday had any such suspicions, they did

not to express them publicly. Jose Cremades, a Spanish employee of the Council of Europe based in Strasbourg, whose 15-year-old son, Daniel, died in the crash, said he was satisfied that Mr. Francis had been telling the truth when he said that investigators still did not know whether it had been caused by mechanical failure, a missile, or a bomb.

Asked by French television reporters whether the families suspected a cover-up, Mr. Cremades said, "Personally, I don't believe that, and I don't believe that most of the people in the room feel that way."

But Valerie Laforge of Calais, whose husband, Alain, 38, died in the crash, said: "I don't know if they're hiding things from us. The answers are not as direct as the questions."

Michel Breistroff, whose 25-year-old son, Michel, a hockey star and a Harvard University graduate, was among the victims, said: "We got the answers that they were authorized to give us today. They say there is nothing new. They are looking for, and will talk only about, certainties."

Asked if he trusted American investigators to come up with them, Mr. Breistroff said, "Yes."

The French authorities appointed a magistrate last summer to head an official inquest. But a French Foreign Ministry official described the inquest as "window dressing for the families," though he said its existence would make it easier for them to trust American investigators and gain access to all their evidence.