Asteroid space probe to return to Japan

June 15 2010

Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency-issued photo shows part of a team of scientists inspecting the capsule carried by the Japanese Hayabusa spacecraft after it parachuted back to land in the Woomera military zone in the Australian Outback.

A space capsule that scientists hope is carrying asteroid dust, potentially revealing secrets about the origins of the solar system, will be flown back to Japan this week, officials said Tuesday.

The precious probe, which made a textbook landing in the Australian Outback on Sunday after a seven-year, five-billion-kilometre (three-billion-mile) journey to the ancient Itokawa asteroid, will be carried on a chartered flight.

"The journey starts Thursday," an official from the Japanese space agency JAXA told AFP from the South Australian desert landing site at Woomera. "It will reach Japan on the 18th (Friday)."

The capsule was carried by the Hayabusa probe, which returned to Earth late Sunday, blazing across the Outback sky as it burned up on re-entry before an enthralled crowd of scientists from Japan, the United States and Australia.

The heat-resistant capsule, which had been ejected earlier, parachuted to a soft landing inside Australia's military testing range at Woomera before being retrieved by helicopter late on Monday.

It will remain within the secure military site until it is taken to Japan.

"They (scientists) are inspecting the outside of the capsule," the JAXA spokesman said.

The probe, which appears intact, is expected to remain sealed for several weeks while it undergoes a battery of tests. So scientists will not know for some months whether it was able to collect any material from the asteroid.

The Hayabusa was launched in May 2003 and reached the Itokawa asteroid in September 2005.

Its return to Earth was delayed for three years by technical problems and scientists had been concerned it might not be able to complete the journey, or could become lost in the vast Australian desert.

JAXA officials were delighted when they were able to land the probe exactly where they predicted, completing an historic mission in which the capsule became the first to complete a journey to an asteroid and back to Earth.

(c) 2010 AFP

Citation: Asteroid space probe to return to Japan (2010, June 15) retrieved 24 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2010-06-asteroid-space-probe-japan.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.