

# US Plans To Put An Indian Astronomer In Orbit

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The United States plans to put an Indian astronaut in space shortly, an American official said on Friday.

In a clear reflection of the newfound bonhomie, Robert Blake, Deputy Chief of US Mission in India, told reporters in Chennai that India's moon mission would have active participation of the US.

"We wanted to do more in the area of space exploration, space navigation, satellite navigation and launch. We want to launch two US instruments on the "Chandrayan" (moon mission). Finally we agreed to include an India astronaut in the US astronaut programme," Blake said.

India plans to send an unmanned mission to the moon by 2008, in what is seen as an effort to showcase the country's scientific capabilities. The mission has been named as "Chandrayan Pratham" (First Journey to the Moon)."

The mission is expected to cost New Delhi about 80 million dollars.

Commenting on the recently signed Indo-U.S. nuclear deal, Blake said the pact puts behind decades of discord between India and the U.S.

"The significant thing in this agreement is that we are reversing the decades of discord between the two countries on nuclear issues. And turning this into a significant opportunity, for significant energy cooperation between our two countries," Blake said.

The deal has been greeted with euphoria, but energy experts say the gains will take decades to materialise and will not answer India's immediate and fast-growing energy needs.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Washington and the nuclear agreement reached on Monday has been called the highest point ever for India-U.S. relations.

Blake added at a stroke, the deal removed much of the stigma India attracted after conducting nuclear weapons tests in 1998, and will catalyse an atomic energy industry hampered by sanctions since those tests.

"That is a very profound statement, as you know, that ever since 1974 the United States in India, this has been a real touchstone of disagreement between the two countries. And we have now transformed into an opportunity for significant cooperation. That is a major turnaround and something which we are very very excited about," he added.

The deal could be scuppered by opposition from the U.S. Congress, from other nuclear powers, or even from countries, which gave up their own nuclear ambitions to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Bush has promised to lobby his own Congress as well as his foreign allies, to amend American laws and international agreements which bar nuclear cooperation with India because it has not signed the nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty.

In return, India has promised to separate its civilian and military nuclear programmes, continue a moratorium on nuclear testing and place its civilian nuclear facilities under U.N. inspection.

India, short of domestic uranium to fuel its nuclear plants, now hopes the U.S. will resume supplies to two reactors it helped build for India at Tarapur near Mumbai in 1969.

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