

Single rocket to carry 6 'private' satellites

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An H-2A rocket carrying six small satellites developed by universities and private-sector companies will be launched Wednesday from Tanegashima Space Center in Kagoshima Prefecture, Japan.

The SOHLA-1 exploratory satellite, which is also known as Maida Ichigo, was developed by a team of small and midsize companies in Higashi-Osaka, Osaka Prefecture.

"In this serious business slump, I hope SOHLA-1 will provide some encouragement," said Hideyuki Tanahashi, 48, senior executive director of Astro Technology SOHLA, a team set up in Higashi-Osaka to produce the satellite in 2001. SOHLA stands for the Space Oriented Higashi-Osaka Leading Association.

Local manufacturers of aircraft parts and electronic control devices established the team, while students at Osaka Prefecture University, Osaka University and Ryukoku University provided technological support.

"I would be nice if this project would make more young people aware of the value of the manufacturing industry," Tanahashi said.

Another satellite, named Kukai after the famous priest and calligrapher, is actually a double unit built by Kagawa University. The priest is believed to have been born in what is now Kagawa Prefecture.

The two units are tethered to each other with strands of synthetic fiber,

and a camera built into the smaller unit is designed to photograph the other unit in space. The satellite will explore the possibility of using the technique to examine the outer walls of space stations.

Masahiro Nomi, 40, an associate professor of the university's Faculty of Engineering, said, "I want to promote the idea that a university in a rural area like ours could manufacture an artificial satellite."

Another satellite, Kagayaki, which was developed by the Tokyo-based information system company Sorun Corp., will observe aurora in space.

The smallest satellite among the six was developed by Tokyo Metropolitan College of Industrial Technology. The satellite is cube-shaped with sides measuring 15 centimeters. It will be propelled by gunpowder.

About 40 students built the satellite in their free time after school and on weekends. More than 20 small and midsize companies in Arakawa Ward, Tokyo, contributed to its manufacture.

Tomohiro Ishikawa, 33, an associate professor at the college, said, "I hope this will encourage the students to explore unknown worlds."

The remaining two satellites were built by Tokyo and Tohoku universities. The Tokyo University satellite will photograph the ground through an extended telescope, while the Tohoku University satellite will observe luminous phenomena in lightning from space.

The H-2A rocket will actually carry two other satellites, but these belong to Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency.

One of them, Ibuki, will observe gas that creates the greenhouse effect.

"Venture businesses set up by universities have been active in developing small satellites overseas. We hope the upcoming launch will stimulate similar moves in this country," a JAXA spokesman said.

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