

Iran sends rocket with animal menagerie into space

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Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, center, gestures towards a model of Iran's new domestically-built light booster rocket, named Simorgh, in Tehran, Iran, Wednesday, Feb. 3, 2010. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has unveiled a domestically-built satellite booster rocket, part of an ambitious space program that has worried Western powers because they fear the same technology used to launch satellites could also deliver warheads. (AP Photo)

(AP) -- Iran announced Wednesday it has successfully launched a 10-foot-long research rocket carrying a mouse, two turtles and worms into space - a feat President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said showed Iran could defeat the West in the battle of technology.

Ahmadinejad also unveiled the model of a light booster rocket that is being built and three new, Iranian-built satellites, touted as the latest achievements in the country's ambitious space program.

The Iranian space program has worried Western powers, which fear the same technology used to launch satellites and research capsules could also be used to build long-range intercontinental missiles and deliver warheads.

A U.S. defense expert said there was no scientific purpose to launching such animals into space and that the launch was likely more aimed at boosting Iran's prestige.

"If they had wanted to test a life-support system, the obvious choice would be to send a monkey," said James Lewis, senior fellow at Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. "Worms in space serve no purpose."

"The launch was clearly part of Iran's effort to advance military technology and assert political dominance in space," said Lewis "It's also a show of confidence. Space rockets give you prestige and influence, and that is what Iran seeks."

The launch of the rocket Kavoshgar-3, which means Explorer-3 in Farsi, was announced by Defense Minister Gen. Ahmad Vahidi to mark the National Day of Space Technology. It comes a year after Iran sent its first domestically made telecommunications satellite, called Omid, or Hope, into orbit for 40 days.

Iran's state TV broadcast images Wednesday of officials putting a mouse, two turtles and about a dozen creatures that looked like worms inside a capsule in the rocket, which appeared to be about 10 feet long. TV then aired footage of the rocket blasting off.

Vahidi gave no details on the research, and there was no information on what experiment the animals would serve on board. The report also did not disclose when or where the launch took place.

Iran's lofty space plans also include putting a man in orbit within 10 years.

Ahmadinejad praised the latest launch and said greater events would come in the future.

"The scientific arena is where we should defeat the (West's) domination," Ahmadinejad said in remarks broadcast live on state TV. He said the launch is a "very big event. This is the first presence of animals in space launched by Iran. It's the start of bigger achievements."

The model of the light booster rocket, named Simorgh, was displayed at a space show in Tehran, along with the three new Iranian-built satellites - Mesbah-2, Tolo and Navid-e-Elm-o-Sanat.

Officials said the Simorgh rocket can carry a satellite weighing 220 pounds (100 kilograms) up to 310 miles (500 kilometers) above the Earth. Ahmadinejad said the Simorgh would carry Mesbah-2 into space but did not say when.

As it seeks to expand its influence in the Middle East, Iran showcases its technological successes as signs it can advance despite the threat of U.S. and U.N. sanctions over its controversial nuclear program.

The West is concerned Iran is trying to build an atomic weapon but Tehran denies the charge and says its nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes, such as electricity production.

Ahmadinejad said Iran built the Mesbah-2 with domestic technology after foreign partners refused to cooperate. Italy and Russia have both declined to help in launching Iran's Mesbah project.

In 2005, Iran launched its first commercial satellite on a Russian rocket

in a joint project with Moscow, which is a partner in transferring space technology to Iran. That same year, the government said it had allocated \$500 million for space projects for the next five years.

The ceremony Wednesday was part of 10-day celebrations leading up to 31st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, which falls on Feb 11.

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