

S.Korea rocket blows up minutes after blast-off (Update 2)

June 10 2010



The Naro-1 rocket blasts-off from a launch pad in Goheung. A South Korean rocket trying to put a satellite into orbit apparently has exploded less than three minutes after blast-off, dealing another blow to Seoul's dreams of joining Asia's space race.

A South Korean rocket trying to put a satellite into orbit exploded

Thursday less than three minutes after blast-off, dealing another blow to Seoul's dreams of joining Asia's space race.

Science and Technology Minister Ahn Byong-Man told reporters the Naro-I rocket was thought to have blown up 137 seconds after blast-off, the same time as ground control lost contact with it.

"The Naro appeared to have exploded in flight," Ahn said, adding that Russian and South Korean engineers were trying to determine the cause.

"A bright flash was seen through a camera mounted on top of the Naro."

South Korea was trying to join an exclusive club currently numbering nine nations that have put a satellite into orbit using a domestically assembled rocket.

Its first attempt failed last August when fairings on the nose cone of the Naro-1 did not open properly to release the satellite.

Spectators waving national flags jumped and danced jubilantly as they watched the blast-off from the Naro Space Center on the south coast at 5:01 pm (0801 GMT).

But engineers lost all contact after 137 seconds when the rocket was at an altitude of 70 kilometres (43 miles) and officials later said it appeared to have exploded.

The scientific satellite had been due to separate from the rocket at an altitude of 302 km and to deploy its solar panels about nine minutes after blast-off.

"I cannot definitely say now but there appears to have been a problem with the first stage of the rocket," Lee Jae-Woo, a space expert at Seoul's

Konkuk University, told YTN television.

"Imperfect combustion can be seen."

Lee said the remnants of the rocket might have crashed in the ocean some 100 km from South Korea.

"I don't understand why South Korea was in such a hurry (to launch it)", he said.

This week's launch was postponed Wednesday for one day after a fire extinguisher system on the launch pad began leaking.

Lee Joo-Jin, head of the Korea Aerospace Research Institute, said the explosion was not related to Wednesday's glitch.

Data showed the rocket had been flying normally in the initial stage, he said, and a joint Russian-South Korean investigation would be launched to determine the cause.

South Korea has invested more than 500 billion won (400 million dollars) and much national pride in the 140-ton Naro-1.

The liquid-fuelled first stage of the rocket was made in Russia, while the second stage was built domestically, as was the satellite.

South Korea, despite its status as an international economic powerhouse, entered Asia's space race relatively late.

It has previously sent 10 satellites into space using launch vehicles from other countries.

In November 2007 South Korea announced a plan to launch a lunar

orbiter by 2020 and to send a probe to the Moon five years after that.

It unveiled the lunar project one month after China launched its first lunar orbiter and two months after Japan did the same.

In April 2008, Seoul sent its first astronaut into space aboard a Russian Soyuz rocket.

Minister Ahn said talks were underway for a third launch. He cited a clause in the agreement between Russia and South Korea that calls for provisions for a third launch if the first two rockets fail to put a satellite into orbit.

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