

Indian satellite rocket explodes after lift-off

December 25 2010



An Indian rocket blasts off from a launch pad at Sriharikota in April 2007. An Indian space rocket carrying a communications satellite exploded Saturday after lifting off from southern India, TV footage showed.

An Indian space rocket carrying an advanced communications satellite was destroyed by mission control Saturday following a malfunction after lift-off, officials said.

Live television pictures showed the rocket exploding in a plume of smoke and fire moments after taking off from the Sriharikota launch site, some 80 kilometres (50 miles) from the southern city of Chennai.

The Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle (GSLV) veered from its intended flight path and was intentionally blown up 47 seconds after lift off, Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) Chairman K. Radhakrishnan told reporters.

The GSLV exploded "at an altitude of eight kilometres (4.9 miles) and the debris have fallen in deep sea," Radhakrishnan said, referring to the Bay of Bengal.

"Data indicates commands from onboard computers ceased to reach circuits of the first stage (engines) but what caused the interruption needs to be studied and we hope to get an assessment of what triggered this," Radhakrishnan said.

The Christmas Day launch had originally been scheduled for December 20 but was postponed after engineers discovered a leak in one of the Russian-designed engines of the GSLV, the United News of India agency said.

In July, an Indian rocket successfully put five satellites into orbit, three months after the country's space ambitions suffered a setback when a rocket crashed on lift-off.

India began its space programme in 1963 and has developed its own satellites and launch vehicles to reduce its dependence on other countries.

It first staked its claim for a share of the global commercial launch market by sending an Italian satellite into orbit in 2007. In January 2008, it launched an Israeli spy satellite.

India aims to launch its first manned lunar mission in 2016 and wants to grab a larger share of the multi-billion-dollar market for launching

commercial satellites.

Government funding of around 2.8 billion dollars has been secured for the moon project.

India in 2008 launched an unmanned satellite and put a probe on the moon's surface in an event that the state-owned ISRO hoped would give the country international recognition in the space business.

The probe's lunar landing vaulted India's up the league of space-faring nations led by the United States and regional competitors Russia, China and Japan and was seen as a symbolic and proud moment in the country's development.

But India still has a long way to go to catch up with China, which together with the US, Russia and the European Space Agency is already well established in the commercial space sector.

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Citation: Indian satellite rocket explodes after lift-off (2010, December 25) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-12-indian-satellite-rocket-lift-off-tv.html>

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