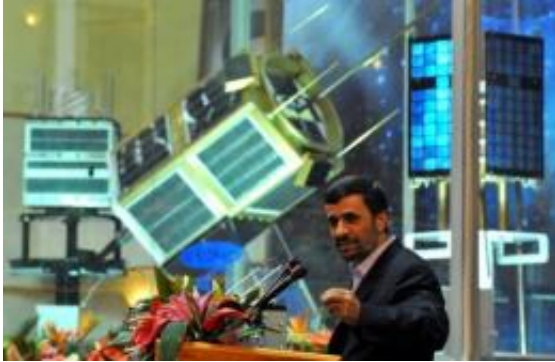


Iran sends rocket, capsule into space: IRNA

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File picture shows Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad speaking during the unveiling of new satellite rockets in Tehran last year. Iran has launched a rocket into space carrying a test capsule designed to house an animal, the official IRNA news agency said Thursday, amid Western concerns over Tehran's scientific advances.

Iran on Thursday signalled a broadening of its space ambitions by announcing the launch of a new rocket and a test capsule designed to house a monkey, amid Western concerns over its scientific advances.

The Iranian Space Agency launched the Kavoshgar-4 rocket carrying the capsule without fanfare on Tuesday, the official IRNA news agency said, citing the president's office.

Iran had announced it would conduct the launch before the end of Iranian year, on Monday next week.

The space capsule, unveiled by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in early February, is designed to carry a live monkey but there were no living creatures on board, IRNA added.

The launch of a large animal into space has been touted by Iranian officials as the first step towards sending a man into space, which Tehran says is scheduled for 2020.

The Islamic republic has outlined an ambitious space programme in the face of Western concerns in the recent years.

It put a satellite into orbit in 2009 with the Safir-2 rocket and sent live small animals -- a rat, turtles and worms -- into space with its Kavoshgar-3 rocket in 2010.

Western powers fear Iran's space agenda might be linked to developing a ballistic missile capability that could deliver nuclear warheads.

But Tehran has denied its contentious atomic and scientific programmes mask military ambitions.

The Kavoshgar-4, also unveiled in February, has been touted as capable of carrying a payload to an altitude of 120 kilometres (75 miles).

IRNA confirmed Thursday that tests of data and imagery transmission were conducted at this altitude, adding the space agency also successfully tested the performance of the engine, launch pad, and electronic, separation, and retrieval systems.

Ahmadinejad announced during celebrations marking the 32nd anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution in February that the capsule would be tested before carrying a monkey into space.

Along with plans to put into orbit several experimental, observation or communication satellites by March 2012, Iran has also announced it is seeking to put satellites in the 35,000-kilometre orbit of geostationary satellites within "five or six" years.

Iran has also unveiled Safir 1-B launcher, capable of placing a 50-kilogram (110 pounds) satellite into an elliptical orbit of 300 to 450 kilometres (185 to 280 miles).

In February 2010, Tehran also unveiled another home-built rocket designed to carry satellites, dubbed Simorgh (Phoenix) equipped to carry a 100-kilogramme satellite 500 kilometres into orbit.

Ahmadinejad has made scientific development one of the central themes of his presidency, asserting Iran has reached a peak of progress despite international sanctions and no longer needs help from foreign states.

The previous launches of rockets and satellites by Iran provoked strong reactions from the West, with Washington speaking of "provocation" and a potential violation of United Nations sanctions limiting Tehran from missile activity.

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