Mars probe to crash into ocean Sunday: Russia

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A Zenit-2SB rocket carrying the Phobos-Grunt spacecraft stands at a launch pad of the Russian leased Kazakhstan's Baikonur cosmodrome just before its blasted off toward Mars in November. Russia's space agency on Wednesday pinpointed the likely trajectory of its stranded Mars probe, Phobos-Grunt, predicting it would crash into the Indian Ocean west of Jakarta later this week.

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"The predicted window for the fragments of the Phobos-Grunt to fall to Earth is between January 14 and 16, with the central point on January 15 at 1:18 pm Moscow time (09:18 GMT), the Roskosmos agency said in a statement.

It also published a map showing the path of the gradually descending probe, with its location at the predicted time west of Jakarta, apparently falling into the Indian Ocean.

But it said the predicted time and place could change as the probe gradually descends.

In an embarrassing setback, the $165-million probe designed to travel to the Mars moon of Phobos and bring back soil samples, blasted off on November 9 but failed to leave the Earth's orbit.

The Russian space agency said last month that 20 to 30 fragments weighing a total of no more than 200 kilogrammes were expected to fall to Earth, with the spacecraft's highly toxic fuel burning up on entering the Earth's atmosphere.

The ambitious and high-stakes project aimed to revive Russia's interplanetary programme, which has not seen a successful mission since the fall of the Soviet Union, and prepare the way for a manned mission to Mars.

Russia has experienced a series of serious space failures in the past year.

An unmanned Progress supply ship bound for the International Space Station crashed into Siberia in August last year after its launch by a Soyuz rocket, forcing the rockets' temporary grounding.

Russia also lost three navigation satellites, an advanced military satellite and a telecommunications satellite.

In the latest setback, a fragment of a Russian communications satellite crashed into a Siberian village in December after it failed to reach orbit due to the failure of its Soyuz rocket.

The head of Russia's space programme, Vladimir Popovkin, hinted this week

foreign powers may be behind the string of failures, adding that the launches went awry at precisely the moment the spacecraft were travelling through areas invisible to Russian radar.