

Russia loses Mexican satellite after rocket failure (Update)

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A Russian-built Proton rocket blasts off from a launch pad at Kazakhstan's Baikonur cosmodrome on April 28, 2014

Russia on Saturday lost a Mexican satellite on launch just hours after a glitch with a manoeuvre involving the International Space Station, the latest in a string of embarrassing failures for its troubled space programme.

Russia's Roscosmos space agency said the Proton-M rocket carrying a Mexican MexSat-1 satellite fell back to Earth and burnt up in the atmosphere after suffering an engine problem on launch early Saturday.

Just over eight minutes after launch, an "emergency situation was recorded with the engines of the third stage of the carrier rocket", the space agency said.

The Mexican satellite launch took place at 8:47 am Moscow time (0547 GMT) from Russia's Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. It was shown live on the website of Roscosmos.

The accident took place at an altitude of 161 kilometres (100 miles), high enough for the rocket to burn up as it plunged back to Earth, it said.

"The third stage rocket, the upper stage and the satellite almost completely burnt up in the atmosphere," it said. "At the moment there have been no reports of falling non-combusted fragments."

Fragments of the carrier rocket, which contained several tonnes of toxic fuel, fell back to Earth over Siberia's Chita region, space industry sources said, while Russia's emergencies ministry said there were no injuries or damage on the ground.

The Proton-M carrier rocket has been Russia's main workhorse used for launches of Western and Asian satellites that earn millions of dollars, but in recent years it has suffered a litany of failures and has been repeatedly grounded.

A commission involving various space industry bodies will investigate the accident and "take the corresponding decisions," the space agency said.

The accident commission was due to meet Sunday at 10:00 am (0700 GMT), a space industry source told Interfax news agency.

Russian President Vladimir Putin "naturally was informed" of the satellite failure, his spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists, cited by Interfax.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev ordered space agency chief Igor Komarov to establish who was to blame, the premier's spokeswoman Natalya Timakova said, quoted by Interfax.



Roscosmos has postponed the return of three astronauts on the International Space Station until June

The prime minister asked Komarov to "establish the exact reasons for what happened" and name those with "personal and material responsibility for this incident," she said.

Russia last year sacked the head of the space agency over previous failures.

'Negative record'

Russia's space programme has experienced a troubling number of accidents in recent weeks.

RIA Novosti state news agency criticised what it called "a negative record for Roscosmos—several accidents in space in three weeks."

The failed satellite launch came just hours after a separate glitch in which a Russian Progress spacecraft docked to the ISS failed to switch on its engines at the command of mission control in a planned manoeuvre to shift the ISS into a higher orbit.

The Progress space freighter was to have lifted the ISS's orbit in preparation for the next astronauts' return to Earth set for early June.

Vladimir Solovyov, the flight director for the Russian section of the ISS, told TASS that a fresh attempt to switch on the Progress's engines would be made on Sunday night.

He said "we need more time" to understand the reason for the glitch.



British singer Sarah Brightman announced she would not fly to the International Space Station as a space tourist in September as planned, citing personal reasons

On April 28, a previous Progress resupply ship heading to the ISS lost communications and crashed to Earth after an apparent problem with its Soyuz rocket.

This has prompted delays in the ferrying of astronauts to and from the orbiting station, which currently has six crew aboard.

British singer Sarah Brightman announced Wednesday that she would not fly to the ISS as a space tourist in September as planned, citing personal reasons. Russian media speculated that she pulled out over safety fears.

A previous Progress ship taking supplies to the ISS crashed in Siberia shortly after launch in 2011.

Since the mothballing of the US Space Shuttle programme, Moscow has had a monopoly on sending astronauts to the ISS from Baikonur.



Since the mothballing of the US Space Shuttle programme, Moscow has had a monopoly on sending astronauts to the International Space Station from its Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan

Experts suggested the problem was a failure of quality control at the production level.

"What's amazing is that the Proton is an old rocket," Ivan Moiseyev, head of research at the institute of space policy, told Business FM radio.

"There have been many launches and the technology should only be getting better, but it is visibly getting worse."

"What we are seeing is a systemic deterioration of the production of Russian space technology," a space industry source told RIA Novosti.

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