

Europe-Russia delay mission to find life on Mars

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The Mars mission has recently been marred by a series of technical problems and delays

A joint Russian-European expedition to find life on Mars has been postponed for two years, the Russian and European space agencies said Thursday, citing the novel coronavirus and multiple technical issues.

The unmanned ExoMars, whose mission is to land a robot on the Red Planet to seek out signs of life, was scheduled to launch later this year after experiencing several delays. But even that has proved too difficult.

"We have made a difficult but well-weighed decision to postpone the launch to 2022," said Dmitry Rogozin, head of Russia's Roscosmos agency.

Officials at the European and Russian spaces agencies said they agreed to delay the mission until August or September 2022 to carry out further tests.

Following recommendations by European and Russian inspectors, "ExoMars experts concluded that the tests necessary to make all the components of the spacecraft fit for the Mars adventure need more time to complete," the statement said.

European Space Agency director general Jan Worner said both sides wanted to be "100 percent" sure of a successful mission.

"We cannot allow ourselves any margin of error. More verification activities will ensure a safe trip and the best scientific results on Mars," he said in a statement that did not mention the virus.

Rogozin specifically pointed to the impact of the outbreak of the coronavirus in Europe saying the "exacerbation of the epidemiological" situation had hampered the scheduled launch.

Travel restrictions introduced due to the coronavirus pandemic are hampering teams from collaborating as before, he added.

'Aggravating circumstance'

The European Space Agency told AFP that concerns over the virus were an "aggravating circumstance," but that ultimately more tests needed to be carried out.

"The main reason for this postponement is the uncertainty about some software and hardware and the need to carry out more tests," the agency said.

The Mars mission has recently been marred by a series of technical problems and delays.

In August last year, the ESA identified problems with the mission's parachute system, raising questions over whether the launch would go ahead in 2020.

Tests carried out in May and August last year on the sophisticated parachute system vital to the landing phase of the mission failed.

The joint space programme is seen as an important symbol of cooperation between Russia and Europe amid a strain in ties over Ukraine and Syria.

Russia has provided the launcher, the descent module and the landing platform for ExoMars, while the robot, called Rosalind Franklin after the English chemist whose work helped lead to the understanding of DNA, and its research capabilities are European.

The rover is to be controlled from an aerospace centre in Turin in northern Italy, the region in Europe hardest-hit by the coronavirus.

The agencies said Thursday that launches were only possible during a 10-day period every two years, adding that when the mission went ahead it would be the first to "search for signs of life at depths up to two

metres below the martian surface."

Concerns over the coronavirus have lead to the early quarantine of two Russian cosmonauts and a NASA astronaut in a Moscow training centre ahead of their scheduled launch to the International Space Station in April.

The crew have been banned from leaving the Star City centre and will miss a traditional pre-launch visit to the grave of the first man in space Yuri Gagarin who is buried beside the Kremlin wall.

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