India launches 36 internet satellites delayed by Ukraine war

October 23 2022

This photograph released by the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) shows India's heaviest rocket prepared ahead of the launch from the Satish Dhawan Space Center in Sriharikota, India, Saturday, Oct. 15, 2022. India launched 36 private internet satellites on early Sunday, stepping in to keep the orbital constellation growing after a monthslong interruption related to the war in Ukraine. Credit: Indian Space Research Organization via AP

India launched a rocket carrying 36 private internet satellites on early Sunday, stepping in to keep the orbital constellation growing after a monthslong interruption related to the war in Ukraine.

The liftoff from southern India was the first launch for London-based OneWeb since breaking with the Russian Space Agency in March because of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

"We have accomplished the orbit very accurately, now the rocket is in its intended orbit," said S. Somanath, the chairperson of India's space agency. He said 16 satellites were put into orbit and expressed optimism that "the remaining 20 satellites will get separated as safely as the first of the 16."

OneWeb now has 462 satellites flying—more than 70% of what the company said it needs to provide broadband services around the world. Despite this year's disruption, OneWeb said it remains on track to activate global coverage next year with a planned constellation of 648 satellites. It's already providing service in the northernmost latitudes.

Each OneWeb satellite weighs about 330 pounds (150 kilograms).

It was the 14th launch of OneWeb satellites and relied on India's heaviest rocket, normally reserved for government spacecraft. All of the previous OneWeb flights were on Russian rockets; the first was in 2019.

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The launch is important for India and reflects the gradual opening of its space agency to private customers, said Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, a director specializing in space and security at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi.

Rajagopalan said India is an expert at launching smaller satellites and has been trying to corner this market, pitching itself as a satellite launch facility.

With the war in Ukraine still raging, it could open an opportunity for India as many countries shun Russian launch services.

"It could spur that trend in a big way," she said.

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