

UK space industry mulls setback after satellite launch fails

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A repurposed Virgin Atlantic Boeing 747 aircraft, named Cosmic Girl, carrying Virgin Orbit's LauncherOne rocket, takes off from Spaceport Cornwall at Cornwall Airport, Newquay, England, Monday, Jan. 9, 2023. The plane will carry the rocket to 35,000 feet where it will be released over the Atlantic Ocean to the south of Ireland, as part of the Start Me Up mission and the first rocket launch from U.K. The rocket will take multiple small satellites, with a variety of civil and defence applications, into orbit. Credit: Ben Birchall/PA via AP

British officials and space scientists said Tuesday they were disappointed but not deterred after the first attempt to launch satellites into orbit from the U.K. ended in failure.

U.S.-based Virgin Orbit attempted its first international launch late Monday, using a modified jumbo jet to carry one of its rockets from Cornwall in southwestern England over the Atlantic Ocean.

The plane released the rocket, carrying nine small satellites for a mix of civilian and domestic uses. But about two hours after the plane took off, the company reported "an anomaly that has prevented us from reaching orbit."

The plane, piloted by a Royal Air Force pilot, returned to Cornwall. The rocket and satellites were destroyed.

"We're feeling awful, to be honest—I'm not going to lie," Melissa Thorpe, head of Spaceport Cornwall, said.

"This isn't the first time we've been knocked, this is the biggest definitely, but I feel OK and we'll get up and we'll go again," she said.

Virgin Orbit, which was founded by British transport and telecommunications tycoon Richard Branson, previously completed four similar launches from California.

Hundreds of people gathered for the Cornwall launch had cheered when a repurposed Virgin Atlantic Boeing 747 aircraft, named Cosmic Girl, took off late Monday. Around an hour into the flight, the plane released the rocket at around 35,000 feet (around 10,000 meters) over the Atlantic Ocean to the south of Ireland.



A repurposed Virgin Atlantic Boeing 747 aircraft, named Cosmic Girl, carrying Virgin Orbit's LauncherOne rocket, taxis down the runway ahead of take off at Spaceport Cornwall at Cornwall Airport, Newquay, England, Monday Jan. 9, 2023. The plane is due to take off from the airport on Monday evening and carry the rocket to 35,000ft where it will be released over the Atlantic Ocean to the south of Ireland, as part of the Start Me Up mission and the first rocket launch from UK. The rocket will take multiple small satellites, with a variety of civil and defence applications, into orbit. Credit: Ben Birchall/PA via AP



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Virgin Orbit chief executive Dan Hart said "a technical failure appears to have prevented us from delivering the final orbit."

"While we are very proud of the many things that we have successfully achieved as part of this mission, we are mindful that we failed to provide

our customers with the launch service they deserve," he said.

The mission was a collaboration between the U.K. Space Agency, the Royal Air Force, Virgin Orbit and Cornwall Council.

Britain hopes to become a major player in making and launching satellites, and is building a spaceport in the Shetland Islands north of Scotland as well as the one in Cornwall.

U.K. Business Secretary Grant Shapps said Monday's launch was "a big moment" despite its failure.

"Space is difficult," Shapps told Sky News.

"It didn't work. I've no doubt that they'll pick themselves up, dust themselves off and they'll go again once they find out what exactly went wrong with it," he said.

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