

Japan rocket ferrying supplies to space station

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The H-2B Launch Vehicle No. 2 blasts off from the launching pad at Tanegashima Space Center on the southern Japanese island of Tanegashima on Saturday Jan. 22, 2011. The rocket carrying supplies for the International Space Station successfully lifted off from the remote island Saturday on a mission designed to help fill a hole left by the retirement of NASA's space shuttle program. (AP Photo/Kyodo News) JAPAN OUT, MANDATORY CREDIT, FOR COMMERCIAL USE ONLY IN NORTH AMERICA

(AP) -- A Japanese rocket carrying supplies for the International Space Station successfully lifted off from a remote island Saturday on a mission designed to help fill a hole left by the retirement of NASA's space shuttle program.

The unmanned rocket - Japan's second flight to the space station - was ferrying nearly 6 tons of food, water, clothing and experimental equipment to the astronauts in orbit aboard the international project involving 15 nations. The rocket also was

carrying cargo for [NASA](#).

After docking with the space station, dropping off its cargo and being loaded up with waste material, the rocket's transfer vehicle, named "Kounotori2," will be detached and burn itself up upon re-entering Earth's atmosphere. Kounotori means white stork in Japanese.

Applause broke out at the control center on Tanegashima Island as officials announced that the launch phase was a success. Tracking was switched to a center in Guam as the vehicle moved rapidly away from Japan.

Kounotori2 is expected to reach the space station on Jan. 27.

JAXA, Japan's space agency, hopes the project will help it build expertise for similar low-cost ferrying missions and push forward manned flights of Japan's own.

Cargo missions for the [International Space Station](#) have become more important now that the United States has scaled back its ability to launch supplies. Since 2009, the station has been manned by six astronauts, but keeping them fed and supplied has become a bigger challenge because of the retirement of the U.S. space shuttles.

NASA is linking up with commercial companies to launch future cargo expeditions.

JAXA officials say they are studying the possibility of reconfiguring the Kounotori vehicle - which is about the size of a large passenger bus - for manned flight.

Japan's [space program](#) has yet to attempt manned flight. Japan has a module attached to International Space Station that can be used by [astronauts](#), but has relied on the United States to get them there. A Russian Soyuz is to take the next Japanese

astronaut to the space station in May.

Japan sent cargo on its first unmanned carrier to the international station in 2009.

Money, more than technology, is generally seen as Japan's biggest hurdle.

JAXA's budget for last year was 180 billion yen (\$2 billion), about one-fourteenth of what the U.S. spends on space exploration and less than half of what the EU spends, according to Japanese government estimates.

Even so, Japan boasts a reliable booster rocket in the domestically produced H-II series - the rocket used Saturday - and has been one of the leaders in launching satellites.

Still, its program in recent years has been marred by setbacks.

Last month, a Japanese probe to Venus failed to reach orbit. Officials said they have not completely given up hope and are trying to reprogram the probe to try again in another five - or if that fails six - years.

Japanese scientists had been hopeful of success with the Venus probe after the country brought a probe back from a trip to an asteroid.

Japan has never succeeded in an interplanetary mission. It launched a mission to Mars in 1998 that was plagued by technical glitches and finally abandoned in 2003. Russia, the United States and the Europeans have successfully explored other planets.

Japan has also been overshadowed in recent years by China, which sent its first astronaut into space in 2003 and carried out its first spacewalk in 2008.

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