

Health & Technology

NASA heading back to Moon soon, and this time to stay

WASHINGTON: NASA is accelerating plans to return Americans to the Moon, and this time, the US space agency says it will be there to stay. Jim Bridenstine, NASA's administrator, told reporters Thursday that the agency plans to speed up plans backed by President Donald Trump to return to the moon, using private companies. "It's important that we get back to the moon as fast as possible," said Bridenstine in a meeting at NASA's Washington headquarters, adding he hoped to have astronauts back there by 2028.

"This time, when we go to the Moon, we're actually going to stay. We're not going to leave flags and footprints and then come home to not go back for another 50 years" he said. "We're doing it entirely different than every other country in the world. What we're doing is, we're making it sustainable so you can go back and forth regularly with humans." The last person to walk on the Moon was Eugene Cernan in December 1972, during the Apollo 17 mission.

Before humans set foot on the lunar surface again, NASA aims to land an unmanned vehicle on the Moon by 2024, and is already inviting bids from the burgeoning private sector to build the probe. The deadline for bids is March 25, with a first selection due in May, a tight timeline for an agency whose past projects have run years behind schedule and billions over budget. "For us, if we had any wish, I would like to fly this calendar year. We want to go fast," said Thomas Zurbuchen, the associate administrator of NASA's Science Mission Directorate.

However, he admitted that "we may not be able to." NASA's accelerated plans flesh out the Space Policy Directive that Trump signed in December 2017, envisaging a return to the Moon before a manned mission to Mars, possibly in the 2030s. NASA plans to build a small space station, dubbed Gateway, in the Moon's orbit by 2026. It will serve as a way-station for trips to and from the lunar surface, but will not be permanently crewed like the International Space Station (ISS), currently in Earth's orbit.

As with the ISS, NASA would seek the participation of other countries, who could provide some of the necessary needed, such as modules for the Moon station or vehicles to allow landings on the surface. "We want numerous providers competing on cost and innovation," Bridenstine said. Before this manned program, NASA is also pushing to send scientific instruments and other technological tools to the Moon in 2020 or even before the end of this year.



WASHINGTON: In this file photo NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine speaks during an event at NASA headquarters in Washington, DC. — AFP

The agency is also calling for quick-turnaround bids to manufacture and launch such instruments, offering financial incentives to make it happen fast. "We care about speed," said Thomas Zurbuchen, associate administrator of NASA's Science Mission Directorate. "We do not expect that every one of those launches or every one of those landings will be successful. We are taking risks." —AFP

New species of Angolan 'horned' spider unearthed

JOHANNESBURG: South African researchers have revealed the discovery of a new species of spider with an unusual horn-like protrusion on its back from the forests of central Angola, considered the first of its kind. Named 'Ceratomyrus attonitifer', the arachnid belongs to the group known as the horned baboon spiders that possess a type of protuberance, but nothing like the softer and longer protrusion of this species.

"So this spider is absolutely unique in the world. It has this huge horn sticking out the middle of its head and no other spider in the world has anything like that," South African national biodiversity institute arachnologist Dr Ian Engelbrecht said. "There are other species that have a horn on the carapace but that's a muscular structure... This structure looks like it's full of fatty tissue."

Researchers first came across the odd looking spider in 2015 when collecting specimens as part of surveys done in the Okavango catchment, straddling Angola, Namibia and Botswana. Several female specimens from the Miombo forests of central Angola were collected out of burrows for the Okavango Wilderness Project. Surprisingly locals were able to furnish experts with information on the biology and behaviour of the spider they had long dubbed as "chandachuly".

South African researchers have only sketched the description of their new specimen but remain unsure of the horn function. "It doesn't make sense that the spider has such a big horn," Engelbrecht said adding that it might "provide some functionality similar to a camel hump or something like that but at this point we really have no idea." —AFP

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