

Business

SpaceX prototype blasts off and crashes in fireball

Construction on next prototype is almost finished

WASHINGTON: A prototype of the future giant SpaceX rocket Starship - which the company hopes will become its go-to for Mars missions - crashed in a fiery explosion during a test launch along the Texas coast Wednesday. But the company line was upbeat as a livestream of the launch displayed the on-screen message "AWESOME TEST. CONGRATS STARSHIP TEAM!"

"Mars, here we come!" SpaceX founder Tesla's Elon Musk tweeted just minutes after the flight, explaining that a too-fast landing speed was to blame for the crash. He recounted the successful parts of the rocket's short late afternoon trip: the take-off, the change of position in flight and its (pre-explosion) precise landing trajectory. "We got all the data we needed! Congrats SpaceX team," he tweeted.

Wednesday's test launch took off and ascended properly in a seemingly straight line, before one and then another of its engines went out. After 4 minutes and 45 seconds of flight, its third engine extinguished and the rocket began its descent in its expected position. The engines were restarted just seconds before landing in an effort to slow the ship, but it crashed hard into the Earth.

Smaller prototypes have already blasted off several hundred meters into the air for less than a minute as part of a series of tests aimed at developing the next generation of rockets from

the company at lightning speed.

'Success'

After several aborted attempts this week, the flight was livestreamed on the @SpaceX Twitter account. The test flight was planned to check the huge metal body of SN8 (Starship number 8) and its three engines for their aerodynamics, including during the ship's return to Earth - which happens vertically, in the same vein as SpaceX's pioneering Falcon 9 rocket.

"With a test such as this, success is not measured by completion of specific objectives but rather how much we can learn, which will inform and improve the probability of success in the future as SpaceX rapidly advances development of Starship," a statement on the company's website said, implying even before the launch that an explosion or crash would not mean a failed mission.

Construction on SN9, the next prototype, is already almost finished. The experimental flights are taking place in a nearly deserted part of southern Texas on the Gulf of Mexico near the US-Mexican border - an area empty enough that any flight malfunction would be unlikely to cause physical or property damage. Musk recently announced he plans to move to the vast southern US state from California.

Any future completed Starship rocket will be equipped with 37 engines instead of nine, and will



BOCA CHICA, Texas: This video frame grab shows SpaceX's Starship SN8 rocket prototype crashing on landing during an attempted high-altitude launch test on Wednesday. —AFP

measure 120 m tall and be capable of carrying 100 tons of cargo into orbit around the Earth. Musk hopes to be able to one day launch several of these space ships to Mars, though they could prove useful even in the short term as NASA eyes

re-establishing an ongoing presence on the Moon in 2024. Japanese billionaire Yusaku Maezawa is currently scheduled to pay an undisclosed sum to take Starship for a spin around the Moon in 2023 - at the earliest. —AFP

Data firm X-Mode booted from apps

SAN FRANCISCO: Google on Wednesday confirmed it is banning location tracking software developed by data collection firm X-Mode Social from apps on Android-powered mobile devices, which dominate the global market. Apple is also barring X-Mode from its coveted iOS devices, according to a Wall Street Journal report. US-based X-Mode has been the subject of recent media scrutiny for its links to the country's defense sector, particularly for selling data to government contractors involved in national security, counterterrorism and even coronavirus response.

Vice News reported last November that X-Mode was collecting the location data of people using apps intended for Muslim audiences, particularly the dating

platform Muslim Mingle. Google sent developers a warning giving them seven days to rid their apps of X-Mode software or request more time if doing so is technically complex, according to a spokesperson.

"If X-Mode is still present in the app after the timeframe, the app will be removed from Play," the Google spokesperson said, referring to the Internet giant's online shop for mobile apps and digital content. Apple did not immediately return a request for comment. However, according to the Journal, it also gave developers a warning that X-Mode tracking software must be removed from smartphone apps which otherwise risk being blocked.

Apple's iOS and Google's Android operating systems dominate the world smartphone market. The two tech giants reported their decisions on X-Mode to a team working for US Senator Ron Wyden, a Democrat from Oregon, whose office is investigating the sale of location data to government agencies, the Journal said. X-Mode did not respond to AFP's request for comment. —AFP

Wealth of US billionaires soars during pandemic

NEW YORK: America's billionaires have seen their wealth rise by more than \$1 trillion since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, according to a study Wednesday, fueling a debate about higher taxes on the rich. The collective wealth of the 651 billionaires in the United States soared from \$2.95 trillion on March 18 to \$4.01 trillion on Monday, said the Institute for Policy Studies and Americans for Tax Fairness (ATF).

"Never before has America seen such an accumulation of wealth in so few hands," said Frank Clemente, ATF's executive director, noting that the gain exceeds a relief package being considered by Congress. "Their pandemic profits are so immense that America's billionaires could pay for a major Covid relief bill and still not lose a dime of their pre-virus riches," he added.

On Tuesday, the White House unveiled a \$916 billion stimulus proposal in a final dash

to break a months-long logjam over new aid for the coronavirus-stricken US economy before President Donald Trump leaves office in January. The new proposal is slightly larger than a \$908 billion compromise unveiled by a bipartisan group of senators last week.

The authors of the study say that the \$1 trillion wealth gain would pay for stimulus checks of \$3,000 for all of the roughly 300 million Americans. The study adds to the already heated debate in the United States about taxing the rich more heavily to narrow growing wealth inequalities. For example, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez - a rising star on the left wing of the Democratic Party - is pushing for higher taxes in New York, which like many states is facing a budget crisis caused by the pandemic.

A study published by UBS bank and accounting firm PwC in October found that the cumulative wealth of the world's dollar billionaires hit a new record of \$10.2 trillion, above the previous peak of \$8.9 billion recorded in 2017. The pandemic sparked a stock market crash in March, which saw some tumble out of the billionaires' club, before a sharp rebound in technology and health stocks boosted billionaires in those sectors. —AFP