

CHINA ON SCHEDULE FOR LAUNCH OF 2ND SPACE STATION IN 2016

BEIJING: China yesterday recovered an experimental probe launched aboard a new generation rocket, marking another milestone in its increasingly ambitious space program that envisions a mission to Mars by the end of the decade. Space program authorities said the spaceship's landing of the on the vast Inner Mongolian steppe keeps China on schedule to place its second space station into orbit later this year.

The launch of the spaceship aboard the newly developed Long March 7 rocket on Saturday was hailed as a breakthrough in the use of safer, more environmentally friendly fuels. The launch also marked the first use of the massive new Wenchang Satellite Launch Center on the southern island province of Hainan. Since launching its first manned mission in 2003, China has sent up an experimental space station, the Tiangong 1, staged a spacewalk and landed its Yutu rover

on the moon. Its second space station, the Tiangong 2, is due to be slung into space in September. Following that, the Shenzhou 11 spaceship with two astronauts on board is scheduled to dock with the station and remain for several days. Administrators suggest a manned landing on the moon may also be in the program's future.

A source of enormous national pride, China's military-backed space program plans a total of 20 space missions this year at a time when the US and other countries' programs are seeking new roles. China is also developing the Long March 5 heavier-lift rocket needed to launch the Tiangong 2 and other massive payloads. China plans to launch a mission to land a rover on Mars by 2020, attempting to recreate the success of the US Viking 1 mission that landed a rover on the planet four decades ago. — AP



CHINA: A woman walks with a child as they visit a park with replicas of foreign and domestic space vehicles displayed in Beijing, China, yesterday. — AP



MYANMAR: A pile of seized drugs burn after being set on fire during a ceremony to mark the UN's "International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking" in Yangon yesterday. — AFP

MYANMAR TORCHES DRUGS WORTH NEARLY \$60 MILLION

GLOBAL OPIUM PRODUCTION PLUNGED LAST YEAR

YANGON: Myanmar police yesterday torched drugs with a street value of nearly \$60 million as authorities struggle to tackle the scourge of poppy cultivation and shut down pill laboratories in lawless border zones. The impoverished nation remains the world's second biggest producer of opium from which heroin is made, according to the United Nations. Decades of corrupt military rule and continuing civil wars with ethnic rebels are blamed for fuelling the drugs trade.

To mark the UN's annual anti-drugs day, seized drugs and precursor chemicals were burnt in three places across Myanmar. Over half a ton of opium and 80 kilograms of heroin was torched along with 768 kg of methamphetamine and 10 million other stimulant pills, a police official told AFP, adding the haul was worth around \$57 million. At a ceremony in the capital Naypyidaw, Vice-President Myint

Swe conceded the battle to stem drug production was far from being won.

"Drugs control will strengthen"

"People in very remote rural areas are trafficking drugs and cultivating poppies for a living," he said urging greater development for the poor and conflict-hit border areas. "Once we have development and success in the local peace process, our drugs control process will strengthen." The government led by Aung San Suu Kyi's pro-democracy party has a massive popular mandate following elections in November.

She has promised efforts to end several simmering insurgencies. But the government's writ currently does not extend to many border areas where drug production is rampant. Both rebels and the Myanmar army are accused of buying weapons with drugs produced in the

so-called Golden Triangle, a zone around the intersection of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos.

While the heroin trade is worth billions of dollars to cross-border narcotics syndicates, opium farmers scratch a living at the bottom of the drug chain. A report released by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime said farmers in Myanmar's poppy-growing villages make less money than other rural communities. The struggle by villagers to make ends meet rather than greed was prompting the illicit cultivation, it added.

According to the UN, global opium production plunged almost 40 percent last year but the drug remains easily accessible due to a supply glut. Asia remains the world's largest market for opiates, accounting for an estimated two thirds of all users, with Myanmar producing 14 percent of the world's opium. — AFP

SCIENTISTS SEND CORAL REEF PLEA TO AUSTRALIA

HONOLULU: As the largest international gathering of coral reef experts comes to a close, scientists have sent a letter to Australian officials calling for action to save the world's reefs, which are being rapidly damaged. The letter was sent Saturday to Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull imploring his government to do more to conserve the nation's reefs and curb fossil fuel consumption.

The letter, signed by past and present presidents of the International Society for Reef Studies on behalf of the 2,000 attendees of the International Coral Reef Symposium that was held in Honolulu this week, urged the Australian government to prioritize its Great Barrier Reef. "This year has seen the worst mass bleaching in history, threatening many coral reefs around the world including the whole of the northern Great Barrier Reef, the biggest and best-known of all reefs," the letter said. "The damage to this Australian icon has already been devastating."

'Obituary'

In addition to damage from greenhouse gasses, port dredging and shipping of fossil fuels across the Great Barrier Reef contravene Australia's responsibilities for stewardship of the Reef under the World Heritage Convention. Leaders from the scientific community at the convention in Honolulu said Friday that the unprecedented letter was critical to the conservation of the fragile reef habitat. Scientists are not known for their political activism, said James Cook University professor Terry Hughes, but they felt this crisis warranted such action.

"We are not ready to write the obituary for coral reefs," said Hughes, who is also the president of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies in Australia. Messages seeking comment from the Australian prime minister

Saturday were not returned. A call to action from three Pacific island nations whose reefs are in the crosshairs of the largest and longest-lasting coral bleaching event in recorded history was presented Friday at the conclusion of the International Coral Reef Symposium.

The heads of state from Palau, Micronesia and the Marshall Islands attended the conference and provided a plan to help save their ailing coral reefs, which are major contributors to their local economies and the daily sustenance of their people. The call to action, signed by the three presidents, asked for better collaboration between the scientific community and local governments, saying there needs to be more funding and a strengthened commitment to protecting the reefs.

'Pledge'

"If our coral reefs are further degraded, then our reef-dependent communities will suffer and be displaced," the letter said. They also called for more integration of "traditional knowledge, customary practices and scientific research" in building a comprehensive coral reef policy. In response to the letter, the scientific community at the conference said: "We pledge to take up the 13th ICRS Leaders' Call to Action, and will work together with national leaders of the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the world to curb the continued loss of coral reefs."

Bleaching is a process where corals, stressed by hot ocean waters and other environmental changes, lose their color as the symbiotic algae that lives within them is released. Severe or recurrent years of bleaching can kill coral reefs, as has been documented over the past two years in oceans around the world. Scientists expect a third year of bleaching to last through the end of 2016. — AP



AUSTRALIA: In this photo provided by XL Catlin Global Reef Record, decomposing coral is shown on the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. — AP

ROTTING TREES CAUSED HUGE, MYSTERIOUS HOLES IN DUNES

SOUTH BEND, Indiana: Mysterious holes that forced the closure of a massive dune at an Indiana national park after a 6-year-old boy fell into one and nearly died were caused by sand-covered trees that left cavities behind as they decayed over the years, researchers have found.

Fungi on the covered trees formed a sort of cement that allowed the sand to keep its hollowed out shape as the wood decayed and collapsed inward, leaving holes more than 10 feet deep in the dune known as Mount Baldy at the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, according to a study published in December by Erin Argyilan, who heads Indiana University Northwest's department of geosciences. She said the phenomenon likely explains similar holes found in migrating dunes in Oregon and Michigan.

'Decayed tree'

Although she determined the holes to be more of a nuisance than a hazard, Argyilan said they could present an unseen geological hazard in heavily visited natural places like Mount Baldy. The popular dune has been closed except for small ranger-led tours since the July 2013 rescue of the Illinois boy, who was trapped under sand for more than three hours. The question facing the National Park Service is whether to keep Mount Baldy closed to the unsupervised public

or to find a way to safely reopen it, at least partially.

Bruce Rowe, a spokesman for the park, declined to comment on Argyilan's study or an ongoing Indiana Geological Survey study that supports her findings. He said it wouldn't be appropriate to comment until the agency had the chance to review both. G. William Monaghan, a senior research scientist at the IGS, said he hopes to have its completed study to the Park Service by August 1. Monaghan said the IGS study, which Argyilan is also involved in, will include a map of potentially hazardous areas based on 1930s photos that show the location of trees before the sand buried them.

The scientists said reopening Mount Baldy would be a risk-management decision that the Park Service would have to make. Kevin Kincaid, a US Geological Survey research geologist, said he agrees with the studies' findings. "I was impressed with the work they did," he said. "I agree with them that the void the child fell into was the result of a decayed tree that had been buried." He said the studies show it takes unique conditions to create these voids.

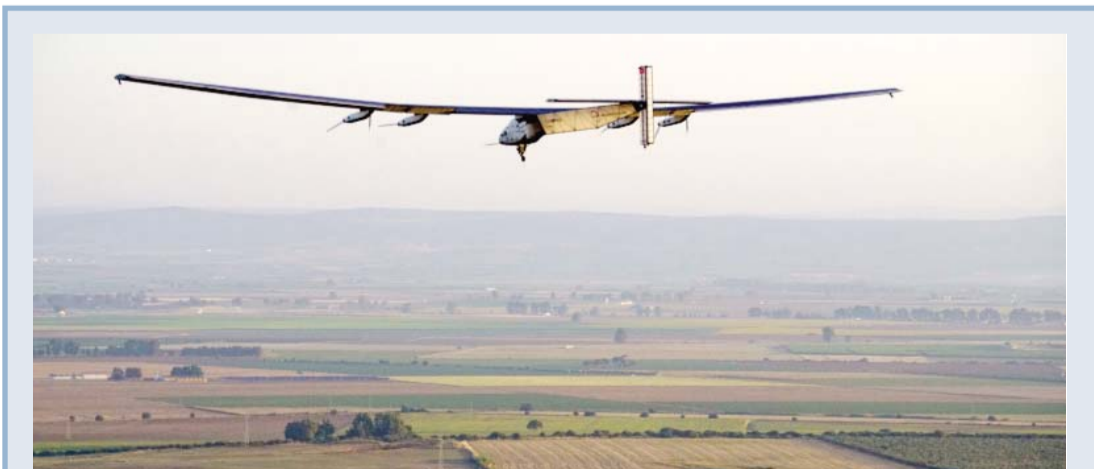
'Moving dunes'

Mount Baldy, which is a popular attraction at the national park along the Lake Michigan coast near Indiana's bor-

der with Michigan, formed about 4,000 years ago and moves faster than most coastal dunes. Monaghan said it has moved an average of about 10 to 13 feet a year since about 1930. Argyilan said similar holes have been reported in migrating dunes at the Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area in Florence, Oregon, and Silver Lake State Park in Mears, Michigan, but the holes at Mount Baldy provided the first opportunity to directly study them.

Ten holes had been found in the dune when her research was published. The deepest was the 10-foot hole that the boy fell into, but most were a yard or less deep, she said. Monaghan said voids only create holes when the thickness of the dune from the hole to the surface is 20 feet or less. When it's greater than that, the void being filled doesn't create a big enough hole to present a danger. When the thickness is less than 5 feet, the hole created is so small that it's not a danger, he said.

Argyilan said there's still a lot to be learned about what is happening at Mount Baldy. "There are moving dunes all around the world. Why is this one forming holes? Why do certain ones form holes and other ones don't? Is it all about the tree? Is it the sediment itself?" she asked. "There's a lot that we need to know." — AP



SPAIN: In this photo provided by Solar Impulse 2, the solar powered plane, piloted by Swiss pioneer Bertrand Picard, prepares to land in Seville in Spain on Thursday. — AP

SOLAR-POWERED AIRPLANE LANDS IN SPAIN

SEVILLE, Spain: An experimental solar-powered airplane landed in Spain Thursday, completing an unprecedented three-day flight across the Atlantic in the latest leg of its globe-circling voyage. The Solar Impulse 2 landed in Seville in southern Spain at 0540 GMT on Thursday, ending a 71-hour, 8-minute flight which began from New York City on Monday. It was the first time a solar-powered plane has made such a journey using zero fuel and zero emissions, organizers said.

Organizers said the aircraft had flown 6,765 kilometers at a maximum height of 8,534 meters and average speed of 95 kph. It was the 15th leg of a planned around-the-world flight which began in March 2015 from Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates.

The wings of Solar Impulse 2, which stretch wider than those of a Boeing 747, are equipped with 17,000 solar cells that power propellers and charge batteries. The plane runs on stored energy at night.

The flight was piloted by Swiss men Bertrand Picard and Andre Borschberg. "Initially the aviation industry told us it was impossible to build such an airplane, but we believed we could do it thanks to all our partners' technologies," Borschberg said in a statement. The organizers said the mission will continue onward to Abu Dhabi. It said the project showed that "exploration and pioneering are no longer about conquering new territories, but about exploring new ways to have a better quality of life on earth." — AP