

INDIA TO LAUNCH 104 SATELLITES IN RECORD MISSION

NEW DELHI: India hopes to make history by launching a record 104 satellites from a single rocket today as its famously frugal space agency looks to zoom ahead in the commercial space race.

The rocket is set to blast off from the southern spaceport of Sriharikota, India's Space Research Organization (ISRO) said in a statement yesterday.

The Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle would be carrying a 714 kilogram main satellite for earth observation and 103 smaller "nano satellites" which would weigh a combined 664 kilograms.

Nearly all of the nano satellites are from other countries, including Israel, Kazakhstan, The Netherlands, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates and 96 from United

States, said the state-run ISRO. If successful, India will set a world record as the first country to launch the most satellites in one go, surpassing Russia which launched 39 satellites in a single mission in June 2014. The business of putting commercial satellites into space for a fee is growing as phone, Internet and other companies, as well as countries, seek greater and more

high-tech communications. India is competing with other international players for a greater share of that launch market, and is known for its low-cost space program.

Last June, India set a national record after it successfully launched a rocket carrying 20 satellites, including 13 from the US. It sent an unmanned rocket to orbit Mars in 2013 at a cost of just \$73 million,

compared with NASA's Maven Mars mission which had a \$671 million price tag. ISRO is also mulling the idea of missions to Jupiter and Venus. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has often hailed India's budget space technology, quipping in 2014 that a rocket that launched four foreign satellites into orbit had cost less to make than Hollywood film "Gravity". — AFP

WWII SHIPWRECKS OFF MALAYSIA BROKEN FOR SCRAP

KUALA LUMPUR: Three World War II shipwrecks off the coast of Malaysia—the final resting place of dozens of seamen—have almost disappeared, local divers say, with the finger pointing at possible scrap metal scavengers. The Japanese cargo vessels, which went down with their crews off the coast of Sabah in 1944, had become popular dive sites, teeming with fish and coral. But local operators say the wrecks have been reduced to rumps, stripped of valuable metals that they believe are being sold on for profit.

Mark Hedger, owner of a diving centre in Sabah and a frequent visitor to the sites, said they had now almost disappeared. "The Usukan and Upside Down wrecks are 98 percent and 99 percent gone. The Rice Bowl wreck is a heap of metal piled up into a ball," he said, referring to the wrecks' local names. There are scores of WWII shipwrecks littered throughout Southeast Asia, the result of fierce naval battles between Japanese and Allied forces. The wrecks, some of which have never been properly documented, are treated as war graves because the bodies of the crews were never recovered.

But there have been growing reports in recent years of scavengers stripping off saleable materials, with several cases reported off the coast of Indonesia.

While some scavenging is done by low-tech outfits where divers rip off chunks of metal and haul them to the surface, there are also believed to be more sophisticated large-scale operations using cranes and platforms. Sabah scuba diver Monica Chin said: "We need to know who did this and must bring

them to justice. All of us are concerned and we suspect that someone is stealing the parts for scrap metal."

"We have to conserve our history. It is really very sad," she added. She shared a photograph with AFP given to her by local fishermen apparently showing a vessel carrying off metal from the wrecks. AFP has been unable to verify the photo but images shared on social media showed a large vessel and crane apparently near the sites, all within a kilometer of each other and known collectively as the Usukan wrecks.

Abdul Nasar Abdul Hadi, director of Sabah Marine Department, said that Sabah Malaysia University (UMS) was granted permission by the Sabah Marine Department and the Sabah Museum to carry out exploration and salvage works at the shipwreck sites. He said they had used a Chinese-flagged vessel and added Sabah Marine Department issued a stop-work order late Jan. Sabah's state tourism minister Masidi Manjun said he was due to meet with university officials Thursday to find out what had happened. "We will give the university an opportunity to explain," he said.

Last year it was revealed that the wrecks of Dutch and British warships sunk in 1942 in Indonesian waters had vanished. An inquiry in The Hague this week confirmed its three WWII vessels had been stripped from the seabed. Naval warships and war graves are protected under international law that makes the desecration of such shipwrecks illegal, but Indonesia struggles to police its sprawling archipelago of more than 17,000 islands.—AFP



PORT HARCOURT CITY: Traders cover their wares with umbrellas of different shapes and sizes along the railway line in Port Harcourt city, Rivers State, yesterday. — AFP

STRANGE BLACK SOOT BLANKETS NIGERIA OIL HUB

CLOTHES, FLOORS TURN BLACK IN GARDEN CITY

PORT HARCOURT: The Nigerian city of Port Harcourt used to be known as "The Garden City" because of its soaring palm trees and green open spaces. But since late last year, black soot has been falling from the sky, scaring and angering residents of the oil hub who claim nothing is being done to protect their health. "You hang your clothes and before you know it, they become black. You step on your floor, everywhere is black," Steven Obodekwe, a Port Harcourt resident and environmentalist, said.

The soot appeared in Nov last year, clouds became a hazy grey and more people were seen wearing protective face masks, said resident Tamuno Alobari. "It (the soot) is mostly pronounced in the morning hours, especially when you run your hands across your car," he said. Timi Isiyeyi said there's no escape from the fine black dust. "When I brush my teeth in the morning and try to clear my throat, I normally notice a dark phlegm and the same applies when I try to clear my nostrils," he added.

Toxic smog is a phenomenon that has more often been associated with populous developing economies such as India and China. The government in Rivers state, of which Port Harcourt is the capital, in Dec urged the public not to panic but last week set up a taskforce to investigate the matter.

The federal environment ministry in the national capital Abuja on Monday declared the air pollution an "emergency situation" and warned residents to shut doors and windows.

Mystery origins

The hashtag #StopTheSoot has appeared on Twitter, people are sharing photographs of their hands and feet covered in the dust, and protest marches are being organized. Burning tyres for scrap copper and illegal oil refineries have both been blamed for the residue. Oil revenue is central to Nigeria's economy, accounting for some 70 percent of government earnings and 90 percent of foreign exchange. But decades of exploration and spills has polluted the farmlands and fish stocks in the maze of creeks around Port Harcourt and across the Niger Delta region.

Theft of crude oil from pipelines—or "bunkering" as it is called locally—sees raw fuel regularly diverted to illegal refineries set up in the bush for conversion into petrol and diesel.

"From investigations carried out so far, we have noticed that it is as a result of years of exploration activities especially from illegal oil bunkering activities," said environment regulation official Emeka Aniamaka.

But the environment ministry suggested another cause after ordering the shutdown of an asphalt-processing plant, saying it was "belching out thick smoke from its operations".

Health problems

In 2015 the World Bank said 94 percent of Nigerians were exposed to air pollution levels that exceed World Health Organization guidelines. Air quality is worsened by the use of generators to make up for the gaps in supply from the

national electricity grid, as well as petrol containing high levels of sulphur. Toxic smoke also comes from the burning of rubbish—a legacy of the absence of municipal waste services. The city of Onitsha, nearly 200 kilometers north of Port Harcourt, was in May last year named as having the world's worst levels of PM10 particles.

PM10 are microscopic particles in the air measuring between 2.5 and 10 thousands of a millimeter or micrometers. They can come from smoke, dust, soot, vehicle exhausts and industries. Doctors in Port Harcourt say they are seeing the health effects of the soot already, with an increase in consultations for breathing difficulties, including asthma.

Children and the elderly are most at risk. The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) estimates some 600,000 people die in Africa every year as a result of air pollution.

Environmentalists are also sounding the alarm, as the soot has been found to contain sulphur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide, which cause acid rain when combined with moisture. Yet Obodekwe, who works at the non-profit Centre for Environment, Human Rights and Development, says it is unlikely any new regulations will be implemented. "Many environmental policies are not enforced. There is a lack of political will," he said.

"It's not too important as far as they (the government) are concerned. They don't understand the implications of the attack on the environment, so they don't take it seriously." — AFP



KUALA LUMPUR: This photo shows Japanese cargo vessels, which went down with their crews off the coast of Sabah in 1944. — AFP photos

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