

International

Chinese craft returns to Earth with rocks and soil from Moon

China completes another chapter in its effort to become a space superpower

BEIJING: An unmanned Chinese spacecraft carrying rocks and soil from the Moon returned safely to Earth early yesterday, completing another chapter in China's effort to become a space superpower. The mission was the first in four decades to collect lunar samples, emulating the feats of the United States and the Soviet Union from the 1960s and 1970s—and going a few steps further.

Scientists hope the samples will give insights into the Moon's origins and volcanic activity, though a more immediate focus was on how the mission showcased China's technological advances.

"China has been preparing for this for a long time," Jonathan McDowell, a Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics researcher, told AFP. "This was very important to them—and still risky, as the automatic rendezvous, docking and sample transfer in lunar orbit had never been done before, by anyone. It's a sign of the maturity of the Chinese space effort that it went off so flawlessly."

In images broadcast on state television, the blackened capsule landed on snow-covered grasslands in darkness in the country's remote north. A Chinese flag was quickly placed next to the capsule, reflecting the nationalist pride that the multi-billion-dollar space program engenders.

Balochistan: Pakistan's land of the disappeared

KARACHI: Hani Baloch and her fiancée Nasim never thought of themselves as dissidents, but one day in May—just weeks before their wedding—the students were snatched by armed and hooded men she says were from Pakistan's security services. The men accused the couple of being part of a terrorist organization from Balochistan, the vast, mineral-rich southern province where the military is fighting a low-level insurgency, Hani said.

Speaking from her small apartment in the megacity of Karachi—just 25 kilometers (15 miles) from the province's border—Hani told AFP how they were whisked off to a secret jail. "They tortured us, they electrocuted us... they hit me in my head with a rifle butt," the 27-year-old said.

The couple comes from Balochistan, but Hani denies they had any links to anti-government groups. "All our students, teachers, lawyers, doctors—all those who are educated, all our intelligent youngsters—are being picked up," she added. Hani was released after three months, but no-one has heard from Nasim.

"They took everything from me," she said of her uncertain future. Activists say similar des-

Space dream

China launched its first satellite in 1970 but human spaceflight took decades longer—with Yang Liwei becoming the country's first "taikonaut" in 2003. Under President Xi Jinping, who took power in 2012, China's "space dream" has been put into overdrive.

A Chinese lunar rover landed on the far side of the Moon in January 2019, a global first.

The official Xinhua news agency described the latest mission as one of the most challenging and complicated in China's aerospace history. Chang'e-5 — named after a mythical Chinese Moon goddess—landed on the Moon on December 1.

During two days on the Moon, it collected two kilograms (4.5 pounds) of material in an volcanic area called Mons Riemer in the Oceanus Procellarum—or "Ocean of Storms"—which was previously unexplored, China's space agency said. While there it also raised the Chinese flag, according to the agency.

The probe's departure was also the first time China had achieved take-off from an extraterrestrial body. The module then went through the delicate operation of linking up in lunar orbit with the part of the spacecraft that brought the samples back to Earth.

The probe comprised separate craft to get to

perate accounts are common in Balochistan where they accuse shadowy security agents of kidnapping or "disappearing" thousands of people over the years.

The military refused to comment, referring AFP to a commission set up to investigate disappearances, which did not respond to requests for interview.

Resentment and bombings

Home to roughly seven million people, Balochistan is poor despite its natural resources—a source of great anger to residents who complain they don't receive a fair share of the gas and mineral wealth. While some groups back negotiations with the government to gain more rights, a separatist movement—including militant groups—is fighting for independence.

Resentment has been fuelled by billions of dollars of Chinese money flowing into the region through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) — a key part of China's Belt and Road Initiative—which locals say gave them little benefit as most new jobs went to outsiders.

Disappearances have increased in recent years, activists say, at the same time as militants have launched a string of attacks aimed at undermining Chinese investment—including an assault on Beijing's consulate in Karachi in 2018. Last year gunmen stormed a luxury hotel overlooking a flagship CPEC project—the deep-water seaport in Gwadar that gives China strategic access to the Arabian Sea—killing at least eight people.



BEIJING: Deputy director of the National Space Administration and deputy chief commander of the lunar exploration project, Wu Yanhua answers questions during a press conference in Beijing yesterday after an unmanned Chinese spacecraft carrying rocks and soil from the Moon returned safely to Earth. — AFP

the Moon, land on it and collect the samples, get back up and then return the rocks and soil to Earth. The return capsule entered the Earth's atmosphere at an altitude of about 120 kilometers (75 miles). When it was about 10 kilometers above land, a parachute opened and it landed smoothly, the space agency said.

"With this successful mission, China will be

And in June, Baloch insurgents targeted the Pakistan Stock Exchange, which is partly owned by Chinese companies. All the attacks were claimed by the Balochistan Liberation Army.

Mama Qadeer, whose group Voice for Baloch Missing Persons, has offices across the province, said when Chinese interests were attacked it provoked a particularly strong reaction. "In retaliation, they kill the ones they have in their jails—even if they have nothing to do with the insurgency," he said. "We start finding more mutilated bodies."

Thousands missing

Qadeer said his son disappeared in 2010 and his body was found a year later on a vacant lot near the Iranian border, covered with burn marks and his arms broken. His group claims some 55,000 people have been kidnapped and 18,000 bodies later found since 2000 — figures Pakistani officials dispute.

Only 155 people are missing in Balochistan, according to a recent federal government inquiry into enforced disappearances. The commission's president did not respond to multiple interview requests.

The findings were "insulting", said lawmaker Akhtar Mengal, who described how almost every Baloch family has a missing relative. "Women don't know if they're married or widowed. Children don't know if they still have a father," said the politician, whose older brother went missing in 1976. — AFP

more confident of its own technologies," Chen Lan, an independent analyst at GoTaikonauts.com, which specializes in China's space program, told AFP. Thomas Zurbuchen, a top official at NASA's science mission directorate, also congratulated China on the safe return of the capsule. "The international science community celebrates your successful Chang'e 5 mission," he tweeted. — AFP

Taleban kill 13 Afghan policemen

KUNDUZ, Afghanistan: At least 13 Afghan policemen were killed when Taleban militants attacked two checkpoints overnight in the north of the country, officials said Wednesday. The militants stormed and briefly held the checkpoints on the outskirts of Pule Khumri, capital of northern Baghlan province, officials said. The dead, and five wounded, had been taken to the provincial hospital, said AINUDDIN Sayad, the director of the facility. Provincial police spokesman Ahmad Jawed Basharat confirmed the attack.

The Taleban claimed responsibility for the attack, the latest in a wave of violence to rock the country in recent weeks. In a separate incident Wednesday, five security personnel and 17 Taliban militants were killed when government forces countered an offensive in southern Uruzgan province, another official said. Violence has surged across several provinces of Afghanistan even as the Taleban and Afghan government engage in peace talks to end the war. — AFP