

# SKorea Aborts Rocket Launch

HYUNG-JIN KIM, Foster Klug, and Susan Montoya



SEOUL, South

Korea – South Korea on Wednesday aborted its first domestic launch of a rocket just minutes before scheduled liftoff because of a technical problem, delaying space ambitions that have threatened to anger rival North Korea.

The rocket was to have shot into space about four months after North Korea was widely criticized for firing its own rocket in defiance of United Nations sanctions. The North said it would keep a close eye on the international response to Seoul's rocket launch.

Officials said they hoped a new attempt could take place within days.

The launch had been set for 5 p.m. (0800 GMT, 4 a.m. EDT) from the Naro Space Center off the southern coast but was halted less than eight minutes before liftoff, senior Science Ministry official Lee Sang-mok said.

The two-stage rocket, called the Naro and built with Russian help, would have been

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South Korea's first launch from its own territory. The domestically built satellite would have observed the atmosphere and ocean, Science Ministry official Yeom Ki-su said. The launch had been set for July 30 but was delayed due to technical glitches.

Since 1992, the country has launched 11 satellites, all on foreign-made rockets from overseas sites. South Korea wants to become a regional space power alongside China, Japan and India.

Lee said South Korean and Russian scientists were checking the exact cause of the failure and Russian scientists believed another attempt could take place in a few days. He said trouble with a high-pressure tank that helps operate valves in the launch vehicle may have been the problem.

In April, North Korea beat the South in the space game by launching a multistage rocket it said was mounted with a satellite. The U.S., Japan and other nations condemned the firing as a test of ballistic missile technology since the same rocket can be mounted with a warhead. The North hailed the launch as successful, but there was no evidence a satellite made it into orbit.

The U.N. Security Council slapped Pyongyang with sanctions, calling the launch a violation of resolutions banning it from ballistic missile activity.

South Korean officials have said the two launches cannot be compared since South Korea's launch is for peaceful purposes and will be conducted transparently.

U.S. State Department spokesman Ian Kelly echoed that sentiment in Washington on Tuesday. "The South Koreans have developed their program in

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a very open and transparent way. And in keeping with the international agreements that they have signed on to, this is in stark contrast to the example set by North Korea, which has not abided by its international agreements," he said.

Relations between the two Koreas — which remain technically at war — have been tense since President Lee Myung-bak took office in Seoul in February 2008, abandoning late ex-President Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy" of encouraging reconciliation with aid.

But there have been signs of warming ties in the past week, with North Korea releasing a South Korean citizen from its custody and announcing it will allow some joint projects to resume.

In another promising sign, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il sent condolences to the family of Kim Dae-jung, who died Tuesday at age 85 after a lifetime of fighting for democracy and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula.

North Korean officials also conveyed their wish to send a delegation to pay their respects to Kim, lawmaker Park Jie-won, a former Kim Dae-jung aide, said Wednesday.

On the heels of the recent overtures from the North, which also included the release of two American journalists, New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson was also to meet Wednesday in Santa Fe with two North Korean diplomats, Kim Myong Gil and Paek Jong Ho, at the North Koreans' request, his office said late Tuesday.

The governor's office said Richardson would not be representing President Barack Obama's administration in speaking to the officials from North Korea's U.N. mission.

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Richardson was U.N. ambassador in Bill Clinton's administration, and has served as a roving diplomatic troubleshooter in North Korea, Sudan, Cuba and Iraq. In the 1990s, Richardson, then a congressman, went to North Korea twice to secure the release of detained Americans.

South Korean officials hope the rocket will boost the country's aim to become a regional space power, along with China, Japan and India.

North Korea also put its army on "special alert" as the U.S. and South Korea carried out joint military exercises in the South.

Washington and Seoul say the annual computer-simulated war games, which began Monday, are purely defensive. But North Korea's Foreign Ministry warned they were "aggravating" tensions on the Korean peninsula.

"Lurking behind them is a dangerous scheme for aggression to mount a pre-emptive nuclear attack," the ministry said in a statement carried by Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency.

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