Gabrielle Giffords tours European physics lab

JOHN HEILPRIN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) -- Former U.S. congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords toured the European particle physics laboratory Wednesday, cheerfully facing reporters but saying little during her first trip abroad since being shot in the head last year.

Giffords was accompanying her husband, retired astronaut Mark Kelly, on a visit to the European Center for Nuclear Research, two days after she rode a cable car up into the French Alps. The lab, known as CERN, had assembled a $2 billion cosmic ray detector that Kelly and his team carried to the International Space Station in May 2011.

That mission came just months after Giffords, a lawmaker from Arizona, was shot by a gunman in a Jan. 8, 2011, rampage that killed six and wounded 13. Since the shooting, she has undergone intensive therapy and made dramatic progress, but she also decided to leave her seat in Congress to focus on her recovery.

During a press conference, Kelly joined CERN officials and other astronauts in recalling the delicate task of installing the 7-ton Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer on the space station so that it can scan the universe for signs of dark matter and antimatter. Kelly commanded the mission, which was the final flight of Space Shuttle Endeavour.

Nobel Laureate Samuel Ting, a physicist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the principal investigator for the CERN-based project, which involved an international team of 600 scientists, singled out Giffords for her support of the U.S. space program.

"Thank you," Giffords quickly replied, beaming.

The former lawmaker sat during most of the half-hour press conference clasping the hand of Ting's wife, Susan, a psychologist who is assisting her husband's project outside Geneva and who described Giffords as a caring, sweet person who she had just met.

Gifford walked slowly, with help from aides, and was dressed casually in sneakers and slacks with her right arm in a sling. Kelly said his wife would not grant interviews until sometime later in Arizona.

"She's doing great, she's doing great," Kelly told The Associated Press. "She's just here to support me."

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