Europe space agency eyes manned flights with China

FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) -- European astronauts could hitch a ride into orbit aboard Chinese spacecraft before the end of the decade, a senior official at the European Space Agency said Tuesday.

The head of ESA's human spaceflight division said his agency is exploring the possibility of joint space missions with China as part of a wider cooperation with the country. In 2003, China became only the third nation to launch a human into orbit after Russia and the United States.

"I would welcome a European astronaut flying aboard a Chinese spaceship," Thomas Reiter told The Associated Press in an interview on the sidelines of the ILA Berlin Air Show.

The German former astronaut said ESA is planning to slowly deepen cooperation with its Chinese counterpart and could aim for joint missions in "the second half of this decade."

"In fact, some of our astronauts have started Chinese language training," he said.

Despite being a member of the International Space Space program, ESA doesn't have its own means of getting astronauts into orbit but has instead paid for seats aboard Russian and American spacecraft.

Since the end of the U.S. shuttle program ESA has had to rely on Russia to get into space.

Reiter said the 19-nation agency plans to hold a series of meetings with its Chinese counterpart, the China National Space Administration, that will explore closer cooperation in the areas of astronaut training, spacecraft docking and developing life support systems.

"Then I think it's a question of political negotiations at a higher level to see if really a common mission could be achieved," he said.

Eventually, ESA would also like China to become a member of the ISS program if U.S. objections can be overcome.

"As I would welcome a European astronaut flying aboard a Chinese spaceship it would be of course a very, very powerful political sign to have China on board the ISS," said Reiter.

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