China to launch new manned spaceship in 2013: Xinhua

Reuters

(Reuters) - China plans to launch its Shenzhou 10 spacecraft in early June 2013, one of the senior officials in charge of the manned space program said on Saturday, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

The launch marks another step forward in Beijing's ambitions for a bigger presence in space that include the construction of a space station by 2020.

The crew could include one female and two male astronauts, who are scheduled to enter the Tiangong 1 space lab module, according to Niu Hongguang, deputy commander-in-chief of China's manned space program.

Niu made the remarks on the sidelines of the Communist Party congress which is meeting to choose a new leadership.

The new plan follows the successful flight of the Shenzhou 9 spacecraft, which returned to Earth in late June, that put China's first woman in space and completed a manned docking test critical to Beijing's space station plan.

China is far from catching up with the established space superpowers, the United States and Russia, but the Shenzhou 9 marked China's fourth manned space mission since 2003, and comes as budget restraints and shifting priorities have held back U.S. manned space launches.

The United States will not test a new rocket to take people into space until 2017, and Russia has said manned missions are no longer a priority.

China plans an unmanned moon landing and deployment of a moon rover and its scientists have raised the possibility of sending a man to the moon, but not before 2020.

(Reporting by Aileen Wang and Nick Edwards; Editing by Ron Popeski)

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