

# Japan postpones launch of new, cheaper rocket

ERIC TALMADGE, Associated Press



TOKYO (AP) — Japan on Tuesday canceled the launch of a new rocket it hopes will be a cheaper and more efficient way of putting satellites into space, saying it suffered a problem that aborted the countdown 19 seconds before it was supposed to blast off.

Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency official Yuko Hoshikawa said an automatic countdown for the three-stage Epsilon rocket stopped when an irregularity in the rocket posture was detected. No further details were immediately available on the scrapped launch from a space center on the southern Japan island of Kyushu.

JAXA President Naoki Okumura said the cause of the problem is under investigation and that he could not say how soon the launch could be rescheduled.

"Finding the cause is our first and foremost task," he told a televised news conference. "We must examine what happened today, and our next launch depends on what we find out."

The Epsilon is the first new rocket design for Japan since the H2A was introduced in 2001. The H2A continues to be Japan's primary rocket but officials are hoping development of the Epsilon will lead to improvements in the much more costly H2A program as well. Japan hopes to compete more aggressively in the international rocket-launching business.

"We are so sorry we failed to live up to the expectations," Okumura said.

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Japan's space policy minister Ichita Yamamoto said Tuesday's launch cancellation was unfortunate but that does not change Japan's policy to set Epsilon as a centerpiece of Japanese space business.

"I hope the cause is promptly identified and necessary measures are taken so that we can see a successful launch as soon as possible," he said.

Tuesday's rocket was to carry the SPRINT-A, the first space telescope specifically designed to observe other planets. It is to be used to watch Venus, Mars and Jupiter.

According to JAXA, the Epsilon costs about 3.8 billion yen (\$40 million), one-third the cost of the H2A. The rocket is about 24 meters (80 feet) tall, half the size of the H2A, and can be assembled and readied for launch in just one week, one-sixth of the time required for the H2A.

The Epsilon rocket, which uses a solid-fuel propellant, is meant to broaden the range of space missions Japan is able to perform and lower the hurdles to space by streamlining the launch process. JAXA says the rocket's extensive use of computer technology means monitoring work that once required a fully staffed control room can now be done essentially on a single laptop.

"If we hope to make the access to space much easier, more sophisticated factors are required," project manager Yasuhiro Morita said in a pre-launch statement. "We are trying to make rocket launches much simpler and ordinary events."

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