

Beat: News

Japan's asteroid probe lifts off on six-year mission

-, 03.12.2014, 15:09 Time

USPA News - The Japanese space probe Hayabusa2 successfully launched Wednesday to begin a six-year mission to blow a crater in a distant asteroid and to bring back rock samples in the hopes of gathering clues into the origin and evolution of the solar system, officials said. The probe blasted off aboard the H-IIA rocket from the Yoshinobu Launch Complex at the Tanegashima Space Center in southern Japan at 1:22 p.m. local time (0422GMT).

The rocket flew as planned and, after nearly two hours of flight, the probe separated as expected and was inserted into its scheduled orbit. Japan's Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) said it received signals from Hayabusa2 at 3:44 p.m. local time, confirming that its initial sequence of operations, including the solar array paddle deployment and sun acquisition control, have been performed normally. "The explorer is now in a stable condition," JAXA said. Officials were still waiting for the completion of the probe's critical operation phase, during which controllers verify the attitude control system and tracking and control facility functions. Hayabusa2 is expected to arrive at the 1999 JU3 asteroid in deep space in mid-2018, after which it will land on the surface and detonate an explosive device to take samples. JAXA hopes the samples will provide an insight into the origin and evolution of the solar system and the raw materials of life. After spending about 1.5 year on the surface of the asteroid, the probe will take the samples to Earth, where it is scheduled to arrive in late 2020. The launch of Hayabusa2 comes just weeks after the European Space Agency's Philae probe made history by becoming the first spacecraft to land on a comet. Japan's mission is the successor of Hayabusa, which landed on the 25143 Itokawa asteroid in late 2005 to take samples. Hayabusa returned to Earth in June 2010, making it the first time a sample had been collected from the surface of an asteroid.

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-3053/japans-asteroid-probe-lifts-off-on-six-year-mission.html>

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Official Federal Reg. No. 7442619