

NASA astronauts riding SpaceX capsule poised for weekend return

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● The mission marked the first time NASA launched humans from US soil since its shuttle program retired in 2011

AFP | San Francisco

The two NASA astronauts who rode to the International Space Station aboard SpaceX's new Crew Dragon are due to return today after a nearly four-month voyage that marked NASA's first crewed mission from home soil in nine years.

US astronauts Bob Behnken and Doug Hurley, who launched to the space station in May, are expected to board Crew Dragon around 5:30 p.m. ET and splash down at one of seven landing sites in the Gulf of Mexico or Atlantic Ocean at about 2:48 p.m. ET today.

"The hardest part was get-



NASA astronaut Bob Behnken and Doug Hurley arrive at the International Space Station aboard SpaceX's Crew Dragon capsule in this still image taken from video

ting us launched, but the most important part is bringing us home," Behnken said during a

farewell ceremony yesterday aboard the space station.

NASA and SpaceX officials chose the coast of Panama City, Florida as the "prime" splashdown location for Crew Dragon on Sunday, but that selection may change as the Air Force's 45th Space Wing monitors the path of Hurricane Isaias, a category 1 cyclone approaching Florida's east coast.

"We have plenty of opportunities here in August and we're in no hurry to come home," NASA's

commercial crew manager Steve Stich said, adding the next return opportunity opens on Monday should Isaias force a delay.

Stich said Crew Dragon, an acorn-shaped pod that can seat up to seven astronauts, has been in a "very healthy" condition since docking on May 31 with the space station, where astronauts have been conducting tests and monitoring how the spacecraft performs in space.

Upon a successful splash-

down, the spacecraft will have completed its final key test to prove it can transport astronauts to and from space — a task SpaceX has accomplished dozens of times with its cargo-only capsule but never before with humans aboard.

"The water landing portion of it is pretty challenging from a physiological standpoint, just after coming back from being in microgravity," Hurley, a veteran of two shuttle missions, told reporters in a phone briefing on Friday.

Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk's SpaceX became the first private company to send humans to orbit in May with the launch of Behnken and Hurley, who will have spent more than two months on the space station upon returning.

The mission marked the first time NASA launched humans from U.S. soil since its shuttle program retired in 2011. Since then the United States has relied on Russia's space program to launch its astronauts to the space station.

Hoping to galvanize a commercial space marketplace, NASA awarded nearly \$8 billion to SpaceX and Boeing Co collectively in 2014 to develop dueling space capsules, experimenting with a contract model that allows the space agency to buy astronaut seats from the two companies.

Thousands march in Berlin against coronavirus curbs



Demonstrators during a protest Reuters | London

Thousands marched in Berlin yesterday to protest against measures imposed in Germany to stem the coronavirus pandemic, saying they violated people's rights and freedoms.

The gathering, estimated by police at 17,000, included libertarians, constitutional loyalists and anti-vaccination activists. There was also a small far-right presence with some marchers carrying Germany's black, white and red imperial flag.

Protesters danced and sang 'We are free people!' to the tune of rock band Queen's 'We Will Rock You'. Others marched with placards saying 'We are making a noise because you are stealing our freedom!' and 'Do think! Don't wear a mask!'

"Our demand is to return to democracy," said one protester who declined to give his name. "The mask that enslaves us must go."

The protests followed a rallying call from Michael Ballweg, an entrepreneur and political outsider who has organized similar rallies in Stuttgart and is running to become mayor of the southwestern city.



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Chilean dogs sniff out coronavirus in early stages

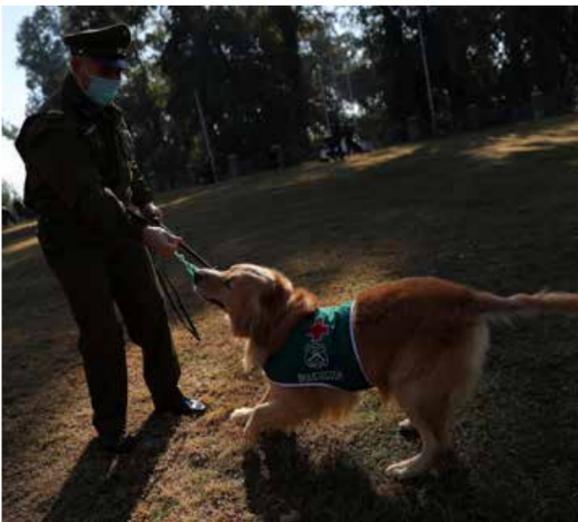
Reuters | Santiago

Chilean police are training sniffer dogs to detect the coronavirus in people's sweat at an early stage, after a similar trial in the UK showed encouraging results.

Four dogs have been selected for the initial training, a mix of labradors and golden retrievers who sport green "biodetector" jackets for their task. They are being trained at the Chilean Carabineros' specialist training base in the capital Santiago.

Sniffer dogs are best-known for detecting drugs, explosives and people but have also previously been trained to detect other diseases including malaria, cancer and Parkinson's disease.

Lieutenant Colonel Cristian Acevedo Yanez, director of the police specialty training school, said dogs had more than 3 million olfactory receptors, more than 50 times those of humans, so were uniquely placed to help



A Chilean police officer works with the dog at a dog training school

fight the coronavirus.

He said the canines could play a critical part as Chile seeks to gradually reopen its schools and shops and get people back to work.

"The role of police is to strengthen our detection abilities in this 'new normal'," he said. "The idea is that our dogs would be in busy places such as schools, bus terminals and airports, and could detect people at an early stage of the disease to be able to isolate them and perform the appropriate PCR test, avoiding mass contagions," he said.

"Essentially what these dogs, four at first, and their guides, will do is save lives."



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Hamster hero? How a Japanese cartoon became Thai youth protesters' symbol

Reuters | Bangkok

Thailand's emerging student pro-democracy movement has adopted a Japanese cartoon hamster, Hamtaro, as a creative way to get support from young people around the country.

University and high school students have rallied almost daily in the past two weeks to demand the dissolution of parliament, an end to harassment of government critics, and amendments to the military-written constitution that critics say help maintain the influence of the army over the political system.

This past week, three of the protests were themed around "Hamtaro," where protesters ran around public places in circles, like a hamster wheel, while singing a modified version of the cartoon's jingle, saying the government loves feasting on taxpayer's money and demanding Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha dissolve parliament.

"The Hamtaro cartoon is what on television every morning, so it connects with us easily," said Pumiwat Rangkasit, 20, a student activist from a group called New Life Network.

Japanese publishing house Shogakukan, which owns the license to Hamtaro, declined



A demonstrator holds a soft toy "Hamtaro" during a protest



Young people grew up with these popular culture characters and they help add new dimensions to our movement, making it relatable and easy to communicate with young people

JUTATIP SIRIKHAN

to comment on the use of the cartoon in Thai protests when contacted by Reuters.

Student groups have used social media to find new ways for protests, via hashtag #Ideaformob, leaders told

Reuters.

Groups are also planning other themes for protests, including Japanese cartoon character Naruto and Harry Potter.

"Young people grew up with these popular culture characters and they help add new dimensions to our movement, making it relatable and easy to communicate with young people," said Jutatip Sirikhan, 21, president of the Student Union of Thailand.

Activist Chutimon Kritsanapanee, 21, from Kasetsart University in Bangkok, said: "Some people may not be able to relate but the main thing is we want to tell others about the failure of this government through these gimmicks."