

# China launches crewed space flight as part of Moon ambitions

AFP | Beijing, China

China launched its crewed Shenzhou-23 spacecraft and eased it into a successful docking with a space station early yesterday as part of Beijing's ambitions to send humans to the Moon by 2030, state media said.

During this mission, a Chinese astronaut is scheduled to spend a full year in orbit on the Tiangong space station, a crucial first in the Chinese lunar landing programme.

The Long March 2-F rocket blasted off in a cloud of flames and smoke on time at 11:08 pm (1508 GMT) Sunday night from the Jiuquan launch centre in China's northwestern Gobi Desert, video from state broadcaster CCTV showed.

The spacecraft separated from the rocket around 10 minutes later and entered orbit, the Chinese Manned Space Agency (CMSA) said on social media.

"The astronauts are in good condition, and the launch has been a complete success," it added.

The craft docked successfully with the Tiangong space station after a flight of about 3.5 hours, the state news agency Xinhua reported, quoting CMSA.

The mission marks the first spaceflight by an astronaut from Hong Kong: 43-year-old Li Jiaying (Lai Ka-ying in Cantonese), who previously worked for the Hong Kong police.



Astronauts for China's Shenzhou-23 space mission (L-R) Li Jiaying, Zhu Yangzhu, and Zhang Zhiyuan, wave during a departure ceremony



A Long March-2F carrier rocket, carrying the Shenzhou-23 spacecraft and a crew of three astronauts, lifts off from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre in the Gobi Desert in northwest China

The two other crew members Zhu Yangzhu and 39-year-old are 39-year-old space engineer Zhang Zhiyuan, a former air

force pilot, who is travelling into space for the first time.

Cheering crowds waved Chinese flags at a farewell ceremony ahead of the launch, while a band played and the three astronauts saluted on stage.

The crew is set to carry out numerous scientific projects in life sciences, materials science, fluid physics and medicine.

A key experiment of Shenzhou-23 will be the full-year stay in orbit by one of the crew in order to study the effects of a long stay in microgravity.

## Year-long experiment

The experiment is part of China's preparations for future lunar missions, as well as missions to Mars.

The astronaut selected for this one-year mission will be named at a later date, depending on the progress of the Shenzhou-23 mission, a spokesperson for the CMSA said on Saturday.

The main challenges will involve long-term effects on humans, including bone density loss, muscle wasting, radiation exposure, sleep disturbances, behavioural and psychological fatigue, said Richard de Grijs, an astrophysicist and professor at Macquarie University in Australia.

He also underlined the importance of reliable water and air recycling systems, as well as the ability to manage potential medical emergencies far from Earth.

## 17 dead, 10 injured in Pakistan as van hits parked bus



People gather beside damaged vehicles after an accident on a motorway in Swabi

AFP | Peshawar, Pakistan

At least 17 people were killed and 10 injured in a road accident yesterday in northwest Pakistan, officials said.

The crash occurred when a passenger bus travelling from Swat to Peshawar in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province developed a mechanical fault and stopped on the roadside.

Passengers had stepped out of the vehicle and were waiting nearby when a van lost control and ploughed into the crowd and the parked bus.

"At least 17 people have been

killed and more than 10 injured," Bilal Ahmad Faizi, a rescue official told AFP, adding that three of the injured were in critical condition.

Muhammad Ali, a doctor at a local hospital receiving the victims, also confirmed the death toll.

Many of the passengers were travelling home ahead of Eid, one of the most important religious festivals in the Muslim calendar.

Road accidents remain common in Pakistan due to weak enforcement of traffic laws, speeding, poor road safety standards, and reckless driving.

## Russia threatens more strikes on Kyiv, urges foreigners to leave city

AFP | Moscow, Russia

Russia has told foreign citizens and diplomats living in Kyiv to leave the city, warning that it plans to launch more strikes on the Ukrainian capital and its "decision-making centres".

The evacuation warning comes a day after Russia launched a massive wave of missile and drone strikes in one of its biggest attacks on Kyiv since 2022, leaving two people dead and more than 90 wounded.

"Under the current circumstances, the Russian Armed Forces are starting to launch systematic strikes against Ukrainian military-industrial facilities in Kyiv," Russia's foreign ministry said in a statement.

"The strikes will target both decision-making centres and command posts... We are

warning foreign citizens, including personnel of diplomatic missions and international organisations, to leave the city as soon as possible."

Russian President Vladimir Putin claims the attack was retaliation for a Ukrainian assault days before on a vocational school which killed 21 people in the Russian-occupied region of Luhansk.



Ukrainian officials say drones now account for more than 80% of Russian battlefield casualties in some sectors, making the conflict one of the first major "drone wars" in history.

## Child found dead with towel round neck in France: prosecutors

AFP | Rennes, France

French police launched a murder investigation Sunday after a 12-year-old boy was found dead near a city centre with a towel tied around his neck, prosecutors said.

The child was found on the banks of the Vilaine river in the northwestern city of Rennes, the local prosecutors' office said in a statement.

"The circumstances that led to the death have yet to be established," but "the involvement



Divers search for evidences in the Vilaine river near the site where the body of a 12-year-old boy was found dead the day before in Rennes

of a third party is among the hypotheses", it added.

"A wet bath towel was tied very tightly around his neck."

Police were at the scene on Sunday evening, carrying out examinations near a residential complex close to the river, an AFP journalist saw.

"It's a real shock. It's a quiet neighbourhood, not far from the centre. I've never been bothered," a local resident in her thirties, who declined to give her name, told AFP.

## 'He's tiny! It's blue!': Scientists find new deep-sea octopus

AFP | Paris, France

On the ocean floor near the Galapagos Islands, a submersible controlled by scientists came across a mysterious octopus as blue as the ocean and no bigger than a golf ball.

"He's tiny! It's blue!" one excited scientist was recorded as saying when she first caught sight of the cerulean cephalopod on footage transmitted from the sub.

The team from the Charles Darwin Foundation had just discovered a new species of octopus nearly 1,800 metres (5,900 feet) below the water's surface, according to research published on Monday.

"Right away, I knew it was something really special," said octopus expert Janet Voight, who was asked to identify the strange species.



A newly discovered blue pygmy octopus off the Galapagos Islands.

At first the curator at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago had to make do with photos of the animal.

Then she received its preserved body in the mail.

"When it arrived, I was like 'Oh! My goodness! It's beautiful,'" Voight told AFP.

She was immediately interested because the closest known octopus of that shape lives off the coast of Uruguay -- in a different ocean on the other side of South America.

Normally to describe a new octopus species, a specimen needs to be cut open so that its

mouth, beak, teeth and other parts can be examined.

"We only had the one specimen, so I didn't want to take it apart," Voight said.

Instead, the team at the Field Museum used CT scans to take thousands of X-ray images, then compiled them to make a 3D model of the octopus, revealing its insides.

"There's nothing like spending the day looking at something no other human has ever seen," the Field Museum's X-ray lab head Stephanie Smith said in a statement.

## 'Deep purple'

The new species, named *Microcroledone galapagensis*, stands out for reasons other than its blue hue, which is believed to be the rarest colour in nature.

The octopus appears to be the

runt of the *Megaleledonidae* family, whose members are normally much larger and live in the Southern Ocean surrounding Antarctica.

"Its stubby little arms with only one row of suckers set it apart from most octopus we are familiar with," Voight said.

Even among "other species with short little arms and a single sucker row, its colouration and smooth skin on the back surface separate it", she added.

While the octopus is light blue on its back, underneath it is a "very deep purple", Voight said.

"We think this colour pattern helps keep it safe. If the octopus grabs a prey item that emits light, that light may attract predators that might then eat the octopus," she explained.

"So the octopus puts its

dark-coloured web over the prey item, keeping itself safe."

Surprisingly, it is not uncommon to find new species of octopus in the deep sea -- particularly in areas that have not been well explored, which is a massive amount of the ocean floor.

"If you took all the land on Earth and pieced it together, you would not cover the Pacific Ocean," Voight pointed out.

She added that she had last seen a new octopus in 2023, off the coast of Costa Rica.

The first sighting of the new blue octopus was made in 2015 near Darwin Island, named after the English scientist whose visit to the Galapagos helped him form the theory of evolution.

Voight's research on the species was published in the journal *Zootaxa*.