

April 13, 2012 // MSNBC Live Chat

NBC's space expert Jim Oberg on N.Korea launch failure

http://worldnews.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2012/04/13/11181546-nbcs-space-expert-jim-oberg-on-nkorea-launch-failure?chromedomain=dailynightly

North Korea's controversial rocket launch failed early Friday within 90 seconds of taking off.

It was an embarrassing set-back for North Korea's new leader Kim Jong-un. But with all eyes on the reclusive country and the presence of foreign media, officials were forced to acknowledge the failure with a brief statement on state TV.

James Oberg, NBC News's space expert and a 22-year NASA veteran, answered reader questions about the failed launch from Pyongyang earlier today.

Chat Moderator:

Hi -- James Oberg will start answering questions at 10:30 a.m.ET, but feel free to start sending in questions now so he can hit the ground running. Thanks

10:36 Chat Moderator:

Hi - Having some technical difficulties with Pyongyang... Hopefully James will be with us shortly. Ask for your patience for another minute...

10:43 Chat Moderator:

Just a few more minutes. James is getting logged on now.

10:44 Comment From James Oberg

Greetings from Pyongyang -- let's talk rockets!

10:44 Comment From mzaccari

was the rocket's breakup visible from the ground in north korea?

10:46 James Oberg:

The breakup sure should have been visible and we had prepared angle-time charts to follow it - but that required realtime announce of launch. Without it, we had no clue to look.

10:47 Comment From Rob

Is it clear if this was a failure of the first stage of the missile or failure of the second stage after seperation.

10:48 James Oberg:

There are still conflicting reports. It even looked possible at first that it was normal ascent misinterpreted by naive observers.

10:48 Comment From wendell
do you have video of the launch?

10:49 James Oberg:
There is one but I haven't seen it. The entire press corps was essentially kidnapped by our minders for half the day, preventing us from working the story and stranding us in a big crowd of pom pom wavers at a statue unveiling.

10:50 Comment From cm
James, what are your impressions of the NK mission staff and others reaction to the breakup.

10:52 James Oberg:
The staff always worried me as too bossy and make-a-wish-hard bullies of nature, who probably wouldn't listen to the concerns of line engineers, I wrote about this before launch -- sadly it seems to have come true,

10:52 Comment From Robert F
what was/is the "Official Version" of the response from N. Korea

10:53 James Oberg:
There was a short report of the failure - at least they didn't claim it succeeded.

10:53 James Oberg:
Today basically all promises of transparency evaporated. Dismaying if not surprising.

10:53 Comment From jw7
What is the proof that it failed?

10:54 James Oberg:
proof of failure is absence of radio signals.

10:54 Comment From Jarod
did weather conditions play a role or simply engineering failures?

10:54 James Oberg:
re wx dunno -- yesterday was cloudy and today was pretty clear.

10:54 Comment From ipribadi
Hi! Any speculation on whether the failure was caused by software or hardware or both?

10:55 James Oberg:
wa-a-a-ay too early, but thanks for expression of confidence in my insight!!!
we have a lot of clues to weigh and filter, too many.

10:55 Comment From Samuel Rivera

How close was this rocket compared to the others that NK launched in the past.

10:55 James Oberg:

Close? How?

10:56 James Oberg:

BTW, the gantry we saw was a LOT bigger than the previous one for the 2009 launch.

10:56 Comment From Greg

Do you expect there to be another "attempt" at a press conference to explain things, or is it just time for the foreign press to pack up and go home?

10:57 James Oberg:

Greg, a very insightful question. At this time our strategy must remain close to the vest.

10:58 James Oberg:

I haven't heard anything about debris recovery.

10:57 Comment From Nathan

Did you learn what kind of fuel the rocket used?

10:58 James Oberg:

fuel...

11:01 James Oberg:

fuel has been described as basic hypergolics

10:59 Comment From Guest

how long will this set back the NKs missile program?

11:00 James Oberg:

there are some stories it will take a few years -- but it's really too early to tell.

11:01 Comment From Samuel Rivera

How close into orbit was this rocket?

11:02 James Oberg:

how close - halfway to first stage jettison so not very close.

11:01 Comment From Bill P.

How does this play out with the cost of launch failure and the lack of food, etc. in NK. Will the 'people' back another launch?

11:02 James Oberg:

can't really answer that,,...

11:02

Comment From Jonathan

Did the US government release any technical information about the failure?

11:03 James Oberg:

Yes, a very helpful statement from NORAD, unusually timely and detailed.

11:04 Comment From @danielscuka

Was the rocket carrying an actual, viable satellite?

11:05 James Oberg:

in the end they never proved that -- they promised us photos of the satellite installation, then gave nothing. It was the highest focus of the controversy, and their promised transparency failed.

11:06 James Oberg:

Together with breaking their promises on letting us 'observe. the launch, it was pretty bad performance.

11:05 Comment From rsc

How did this missile failure compare to the previous North Korean failed attempts?

11:06 James Oberg:

compare? That's not a short answer question -- gimme some days on that.

11:07 Comment From Greg

How far away from the launch site were you situated?

11:07 James Oberg:

Pyongyang is about 90 miles SE of the site.

11:07 James Oberg:

google-earth can get it exact...

11:07 Comment From BF

In terms of the NK facilities, scientists, engineers, etc, what kinds of signs would you have been looking for that might've raised your confidence in their ability to pull off a highly technical launch such as this?

11:09 James Oberg:

The hardware looked good. A lot of the answers -- like soonest possible AOS [signal acquisition] were authentic. What really raised alarm bells was seeing the dictatorial top-down ideologically-justified approach. It scared the solid propellant out of me.

11:09 Comment From JO

Do the NKs realize you're a rocket expert or do they think ur just a press member?

11:11 James Oberg:

No, they had me pegged. It's why at the MCC they invited me in first to sit next to the director. And why some other networks besides NBC - who generously and wisely paid my way, thank you very much -- also got video of me on air.

11:11 Comment From Kurt

What are the chances (though I don't believe them) that the rocket was shot down,..say by the Boeing airborne laser mounted to the nose of a 747?

11:12 James Oberg:

Zero.

11:12 James Oberg:

Too many surrounding witnesses.

11:12 Comment From Guest

Could there be a possibility of "smoke + mirrors" on North Korea's part lending us to believe they don't have the technology but in fact they do?

11:13 James Oberg:

I don't see that level of finesse -- but then, that might be because they HAVE real finesse. But I doubt it.

11:14 James Oberg:

The smoke and mirrors theory is that the mission carried not a satellite but an experimental reentry vehicle, the last component of a long-range missile weapon.

11:14 Comment From Matt

Any indications the North Koreans will try to blame this failure on foreign interference/sabotage?

11:15 James Oberg:

If by 'indications; you mean 'past practice', yes,

11:15 James Oberg:

Even some Russians did so for Phobos-Grunt recently.

11:15

Comment From Ron Sullivan

The 90 second point of destruction would have been pretty close to the Max-Q point of flight, correct?

11:17 James Oberg:

re max-Q, correct, we noticed that but couldn't feel comfortable in the initial reports, That might be related to a aeroshroud separation, though -- it would be nice to see what is being pulled out of the

water, a lot should survive, and the water's scuba-depth, not a problem.

11:17 Comment From Mark

Where does N Korea get its "rocket technology"

11:18 James Oberg:

Hardware was ultimately Russian in origin through intermediaries, but they manufacture all current stuff themselves.

11:18 James Oberg:

so i hear.

11:18 Comment From Ryan D

Is there a possibility there may be some type of nuclear test followed by this test in the next few days?

11:19 James Oberg:

don't ask me. i didn't even know about santorum.

11:19 James Oberg:

gotta run -- gotta do some TV for use tonight. Bye for now.

11:20 Chat Moderator:

Thanks for all of your great questions! See more of James Oberg's reporting on NBC's Nightly News with Brian Williams, the Today Show, MSNBC cable and msnbc.com.