



AP Photo/NASA, Ben Smegelsky

In this undated photo provided by NASA, Magnetospheric Multiscale (MMS) observatories are processed for launch in a clean room at the Astrotech Space Operations facility in Titusville, Fla.

NASA set to launch craft to solve magnetic mystery

AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — NASA is sending four identical spacecraft on a billion-dollar mission to study the explosive give-and-take of the Earth and sun's magnetic fields.

Liftoff of the unmanned Atlas rocket — and NASA's Magnetospheric Multiscale spacecraft — was set for 10:44 p.m. Thursday. Everything was going well in the countdown as the sun set, and the chance of good weather improved to 80 percent.

The quartet will be launched into an oblong orbit stretching tens of thousands of miles into the magnetosphere — nearly halfway to the moon at one point. They will fly in pyramid formation, between 6 miles and 250 miles apart, to provide 3-D views of magnetic reconnection on the smallest of scales.

Magnetic reconnection is what happens when magnetic fields like those around Earth and the sun come together, break apart, then come together again, releasing vast energy.

This repeated process drives the aurora, as well as solar storms that can disrupt

communications and power on Earth. Data from this two-year mission should help scientists better understand so-called space weather.

Each observatory resembles a giant octagonal wheel, stretching more than 11 feet across and 4 feet high, and weighing 3,000 pounds apiece. They're numbered and stacked like tires on top of the rocket, with No. 4 popping free more than an hour after liftoff, followed every five minutes by another.

Principal investigator Jim Burch from the Southwest Research Institute in San Antonio said measurements will be made down to the electron scale, significantly smaller than previous heliophysics missions. In all, there are 100 science sensors.

The findings from the \$1.1 billion mission will be useful in understanding magnetic reconnection throughout the universe. Closer to home, space weather scientists along with everyone on Earth hopefully will benefit.

"We're not setting out here to solve space weather," Burch said. "We're setting out to learn the fundamental features of magnetic reconnection because that's what drives space weather."

Fake IRS agents target thousands in tax scam

STEPHEN OHLEMACHER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Fake IRS agents have targeted more than 366,000 people with harassing phone calls demanding payments and threatening jail in the largest scam of its kind in the history of the agency, a federal investigator said Thursday.

More than 3,000 people have fallen for the ruse since 2013, said Timothy Camus, a Treasury deputy inspector general for tax administration. They were conned out of a total of \$15.5 million.

The scam has claimed victims in almost every state, Camus said. One unidentified victim lost more than \$500,000.

"The criminals do not discriminate. They are calling people everywhere, of all income levels and backgrounds," Camus told the Senate Finance Committee at a hearing. "The callers often warned the victims that if they hung up, local police would come to their homes to arrest them."

The scam is so widespread that investigators believe there is more than one group of perpetrators, including some overseas.

Camus said even he received a call from one of the scammers at his home on a Saturday. He said he had a stern message for the caller: "Your day will come."

Sen. Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., said he got a similar call, but realized it wasn't a real IRS agent.

"It was a very convincing, convincing phone call," Isakson said.

So far, two people in Florida have been arrested, Camus said. They were accused of being part of a scam that involved people in call centers in India contacting U.S. taxpayers and pretending to be IRS agents.

"These criminal acts are perpetrated by thieves hiding behind telephone lines and computers, preying on honest taxpayers and robbing the Treasury of tens of billions of dollars every year," said Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee.

Tax scams often increase during tax filing season, and with millions of Americans preparing their returns ahead of the April 15 deadline, the IRS is seeing many cases of identity theft and refund fraud.

In recent years the IRS has stepped up efforts to detect large numbers of tax refunds going to the same address or bank account. Using computer filters, the agency identified more than 517,000 suspicious returns and blocked \$3.1 billion in fraudulent returns, as of October 2014, Camus said in his testimony.

In 2012, the IRS started working more closely with U.S. attorneys' offices around the country to combat tax refund fraud by people using stole identities, said Caroline Ciralo, acting assistant attorney general for the Justice Department's tax division. Since then, the tax division has opened nearly 1,000 investigations and brought prosecutions against more than 1,400 people, Ciralo told the Senate Finance Committee hearing.

"Given the sophistication of this criminal activity and the fact that a lot of it comes from overseas, this looks to me like an emerging type of organized crime," said Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon, the top Democrat on the Finance Committee.

The inspector general's office started receiving complaints about the telephone scam in 2013. Immigrants were the primary target early on, the IG's office said. But the scam has since become more widespread.

As part of the telephone scam, fake IRS agents call taxpayers, claim they owe taxes, and demand payment using a prepaid debit card or a wire transfer. Those who refuse are threatened with arrest, deportation or loss of a business or driver's license, Camus said.

The callers can manipulate caller ID to make it look like they are calling from an IRS phone number. They might even know the last four digits of the taxpayer's Social Security number, Camus said.

IS accepts Boko Haram pledge

BEIRUT (AP) — Islamic State militants have accepted a pledge of allegiance by the Nigerian-born Boko Haram extremist group, a spokesman for the Islamic State movement said Thursday.

The development comes as both movements, which are among the most ruthless in the world, are under increasing military pressure.

Islamic State seized much of northern and western Iraq last summer giving it control of about a third of both Iraq and Syria. But it is now struggling against Iraqi forces seeking to recapture Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit, while coming under fire from U.S.-led coalition air strikes in other parts of the country and in Syria.

Boko Haram, meanwhile,

has been weakened by a multinational force that has dislodged it from a score of northeastern Nigerian towns. But its new Twitter account, increasingly slick and more frequent video messages and a new media arm all were considered signs that the group is now being helped by IS propagandists.

Then on Saturday, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau posted an audio recording online that pledged allegiance to IS. On Thursday, the Islamic State group's media arm Al-Furqan, in an audio recording by spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, said that Boko Haram's pledge of allegiance has been accepted, claiming the caliphate has now expanded to West Africa.

Al-Adnani had urged foreign fighters from around the world to migrate and join Boko Haram.

BRIEFLY

More children at risk of measles in wake of Ebola

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ebola's toll moved beyond 10,000 deaths Thursday even as researchers warned of yet another threat to hard-hit West Africa: On the heels of the unprecedented devastation, large outbreaks of measles and other vaccine-preventable diseases could move into the region.

Ebola derailed child immunizations in the three countries hardest hit by Ebola — Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, leaving hundreds of thousands more children vulnerable to the more routine infections, researchers said Thursday. Already, worrisome clusters of measles cases are cropping up.

The new study warns

that it's crucial to restart the shots quickly, citing math models that estimate thousands could die if a large enough measles outbreak were to strike before the battered health care system has a chance to recover.

Measles epidemics often follow humanitarian crises because "measles is so incredibly contagious," explained Johns Hopkins University epidemiologist Justin Lessler, who led the study published in the journal Science.

The Ebola death milestone announced by the World Health Organization on Thursday had been expected for weeks, even though overall the epidemic is waning. Liberia has begun the 42-day countdown toward being declared Ebola-free if no new cases arise. Guinea and Sierra Leone still are struggling to end infections.



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