



CHATTY COMPANION. In this undated photo, Kirobo the robot, left, and Japanese astronaut Koichi Wakata pose for a photo while making small talk in Japanese on the International Space Station. The first humanoid robot in space performed its first mission at the space station, holding a series of conversations with Wakata and keeping him company. The talks are part of an experiment testing the robot's autonomous conversation functions. Kirobo is programmed to process questions and select words from its vocabulary to construct an answer, instead of giving pre-programmed responses to specific questions. (AP Photo/Kibo Robot Project)

Kirobo the robot chats with astronaut on space station

By Emily Wang
The Associated Press

TOKYO — The first humanoid robot in space with speech capability made small talk with a Japanese astronaut and said it had no problem with zero gravity on the International Space Station.

Footage released by the robot's developers showed Kirobo performing its first mission on the station, talking in Japanese with astronaut Koichi Wakata to test its autonomous conversation functions.

Wakata said he was glad to meet Kirobo, and asked the robotic companion how it felt about being in a zero-gravity environment.

"I'm used to it now, no problem at all," Kirobo quipped.

Kirobo is programmed to process questions and select words from its vocabulary to construct an answer, instead of giving pre-programmed responses to specific questions.

The creator of the robot, Tomotaka Takahashi, said the autonomous functions meant nobody knew how well Kirobo would be able to answer Wakata's

questions.

Though Kirobo had some awkward pauses and Wakata spoke more slowly than usual at times in an early chat, Takahashi said conversations smoothed out over time.

"Through layers of communication, we were able to observe the initial stages of a relationship begin to develop between a human and a robot, and I think that was our biggest success" he said.

NASA said its Robonaut 2 was the first humanoid robot ever to fly in space. The torso-only robot without legs has been on the International Space Station since 2011.

Kirobo took off from Japan's Tanegashima Space Center for the International Space Station this summer aboard a space cargo transporter. Wakata arrived in November and will assume command of the station in March.

The project is a joint endeavor between advertising company Dentsu, automaker Toyota, and Takahashi at the University of Tokyo's Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology.

Experiments with Kirobo will continue until it returns to earth at the end of 2014.

Tanaka's team says he can seek career in MLB

By Mari Yamaguchi
The Associated Press

TOKYO — Pitcher Masahiro Tanaka is set to move to the majors next season after his Japanese team, the Rakuten Eagles, announced it was prepared to let him leave, reversing its earlier rejection.

Rakuten Eagles president Yozo Tachibana told a news conference that the team has decided to release him through the posting system, paving the way for his departure. Tachibana said Tanaka's outstanding performance over the past seven years, including this season, meant he deserved to be allowed to move to the U.S.

Tanaka went 24-0 with a 1.27 ERA with the Eagles during the regular season and sought a move to the majors, but has two years remaining on his contract and Rakuten was under no obligation to release him.

"I'm grateful to the team for allowing me to try. Now I've made a first step," he said. "I hope I would receive offers from as many teams as possible so I have a wider option."

The New York Yankees are considered the leading candidates to sign Tanaka, though the capping of the posting fee at \$20 million meant many other teams could also afford to make offers.

The Eagles had rejected the new posting system, but it was passed by a vote of Japan's professional teams. Following that decision, Rakuten had initially said they want to retain Tanaka, before the recent change of heart.

Tachibana said the team took into consideration Tanaka's "outstanding contri-



MAJOR MOVE. Rakuten Eagles pitcher Masahiro Tanaka pitches against the Yomiuri Giants during Game 7 of baseball's Japan Series in Sendai, north-eastern Japan. Tanaka is set to move to the majors next season after the Rakuten Eagles announced that the team was prepared to let him leave, reversing an earlier rejection. (AP Photo/Kyodo News, File)

but ion to the team" since he joined the Eagles seven years ago.

For 30 days from the time a player is posted, any Major League Baseball (MLB) team can attempt to sign the player. It pays the posting fee only if it signs the player.

The new posting system was negotiated after some MLB teams objected that only the richest clubs could afford to bid on top Japanese players.

Under the previous agreement, which

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