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Moon mission moonshine?

It could be a dream too far. It could be a case of mismatched priorities, a casual discussion about a momentous project or merely an attempt to seek publicity from an otherwise forgotten minister.

It could be one or all of these reasons combined that has sown doubt and criticism about a remark by Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation Minister Anek Laothamatas that Thailand will go to the moon in seven years.

An ambitious plan? It definitely is. Alas, Mr Anek's mission to the moon seems set for a troubled launch because of his own short-sightedness. It raises more questions than he was willing to answer.

Space science and exploration are unquestionably topics that could inspire people and encourage advanced technological development, giving rise to many high-tech innovations and industries in return.

It does seem odd, therefore, that Mr Anek chose to unveil the rather grand "mission to the moon" as an aside during a press conference on Chulalongkorn University's fund-raising campaign to build a factory to produce a Covid-19 vaccine for Thais.

Out of the blue, the innovation minister announced Thailand would be the fifth Asian nation to send its own spacecraft to the moon, after China, India, Japan, and South Korea.

He said the mission should be accomplished within seven years. He also said that it is likely the project will need public support including fund-raising campaigns.

The minister said the space programme will change the face of Thailand. It will no longer be regarded as a developing country but one with a bright future, full of opportunities and hope.

Mr Anek's space dream has been met mostly with scepticism.

Following his announcement, the internet exploded with comments and memes questioning whether there are more problems in the country that need immediate attention and resources than his ambition to send a spacecraft to plant Thailand's flag on the moon.

A selection of comments: "Many people can't even get to their workplace safely, so why bother about the moon? Look at the condition of public buses."

"Should the government tackle the toxic PM2.5 smog before going to the moon?"

"Instead of building a spacecraft, why don't you start by fixing the uneven curbs?"

Most people asked whether an investment for the space programme, if established, could be justified considering most people are still struggling financially.

The country's infrastructure, especially mass-transport systems, is still sorely inadequate. Given Thailand's limited resources, should they be diverted to fulfill the minister's space dream rather than fund projects that will directly improve people's livelihoods and well-being, critics said.

The problem with Mr Anek's moon vision is that it seems to have risen out of nowhere. Whether this is a worthy pursuit or not, Mr Anek should find the time and place to explain why the country needs a space programme and how it can benefit the public.

To float the idea about space exploration as if it were an anecdotal undertaking deflated its momentous value and the downstream effect it could produce on the country's scientific community.

To say the moon mission would lift Thailand up from "developing country" status also made it appear as if the minister was only seeking publicity.

Until the minister can clarify these doubts about whether Thailand actually needs a space programme, there should be no countdown to the launch.