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Diagnosed with cancer on Aditya-L1 launch day, cured now: Isro chief

HT Correspondent
letters@hindustantimes.com

NEW DELHI: Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) chief S Somanath was diagnosed with cancer on September 2 last year, the day India launched Aditya-L1, its first space observatory to study the sun, Somanath said on Monday.

A growth was noticed in one of the scans on the day Aditya-L1 was set to launch, he said in an interview to Tarmak Media House, a Bengaluru-based aerospace and defence news portal. "There were some health issues during Chandrayaan-3 mission launch (on July 13). However, it was not clear to me at the time, I did not have a clear understanding about it," he said.

The diagnosis came as a shock to him, his family and colleagues, who was by his side throughout this challenging period, Somanath said. The cancer is in remission after surgery and chemotherapy and he has resumed his duties, the space chief said. "I was uncertain about a complete cure at the time (of the diagnosis); I was undergoing the process," Somanath said. "I will be undergoing regular checkups and scans. But, now I am completely cured, and have resumed my duties."


S Somanath

The Aditya-L1, India's first mission to study the sun, will allow scientists to unlock new insights about the centre of our solar system by ensuring uninterrupted observations of the Sun. The spacecraft is meant to be placed in a halo orbit around Lagrange point 1 (L1) of the Sun-Earth system, which is about 1.5 million km from the Earth. The craft was launched on September 2 from the spaceport in Sriharikota.

Isro identifies 48 backup points for safe return of Gaganyaan astronauts

Soumya Pillai
letters@hindustantimes.com

NEW DELHI: The Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) has identified 48 backup points across the world where the Gaganyaan crew could splash down to ensure a safe recovery and rescue of the astronauts during the return mission, senior officials said.

In an ideal situation, the Gaganyaan module is marked to land in Arabian Sea where Indian agencies will be stationed to rescue the crew and the module, the officials said. However, in case of a deviation in the main plan, the space agency has identified 48 backup sites in international waters, they said.

"In any mission, there is an ideal scenario and there are backup plans in case that is not achieved. For Gaganyaan mission, if everything goes by the book, we will be able to land the module in the Indian waters," a senior Isro official associated with the mission said.


Out of the four astronaut designates, three will be selected to fly in the final mission.

"But since this is a human spaceflight, we cannot take any chance to ensure the safety of the crew and therefore, we have marked possible points where the capsule could land. Even a minor variation in the mission can lead to the capsule landing hundreds of kilometres away," the official said, requesting anonymity.

The Gaganyaan mission, India's first human spaceflight project, aims to demonstrate Isro's human spaceflight capability by launching a crew of three members to an orbit of 400km for a three-day mission and bringing them back safely.

The official said that the space agency had initially finalised two landing spots in Indian waters, one in the Arabian sea and the other in the Bay of Bengal. However, considering the rough waters and the unpredictability of the Bay of Bengal, the landing site in the Arabian Sea was finalised. "The progress for Gaganyaan mission is moving at a satisfactory pace. We are confident that we will be able to conduct at least one uncrewed mission this year before the final mission is undertaken," the official added.

Leading up to the actual manned mission, the space agency will be conducting several rounds of tests to ensure the systems are safe to carry and bring back astronauts safely to Earth.

Last week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced the four astronauts designated selected by the Indian Air Force for the mission.

Indian Airforce group captain Prashant Balakrishnan Nair, group captain Ajit Krishnan, group captain Angad Pratap and wing commander Subhanshu Shukla have been training for the Gaganyaan mission for the last five years in Russian and Indian facilities.

Out of the four astronaut designates, three will be selected to fly in the final mission, which is expected to take flight by 2025.