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## Large number of Russian experts enter N. Korea to help spy satellite launch efforts: source

A large number of Russian experts have entered North Korea to support its spy satellite launch efforts, and Pyongyang has staged more engine tests than expected to likely meet their "high" standards, a senior South Korean defense official said Sunday.

Speculation has persisted over the timing of the North's highly anticipated launch as it vowed last December to place three more military spy satellites in orbit this year, a month after successfully launching its first one.

On Friday, South Korea's military

said it had detected apparent signs of preparations for a new launch after previously stating that there were no indications of an imminent one.

"North Korea has very carefully conducted (rocket) engine tests much more than expected," the official told Yonhap News Agency. "Looking at North Korea's activities last year, it should have already staged a (launch)."

The November launch of the Malligyong-1 satellite took place after two failed attempts in May and August.

The official said many Russian technicians have entered North Korea after Russian President Vladimir Putin pledged last year to support the North's satellite program, and they likely have "high" standards, prompting the delay.

"North Korea might have been brave enough to stage launches when it didn't know much, but the (Russian) experts likely told them not to," the official said.

Last September, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un met Putin for a summit at a spaceport in Russia's Far

East, where the Russian leader said he would help the North build satellites.

Compared to last year, North Korea likely faces more pressure to stage a successful launch for its next attempt, the official said, with both the space rocket and the satellite said to have issues.

The North's three-stage space rocket is said to have problems in its second and third stage engines, and the tests could be aimed at addressing the issues, and possibly lead to improvements to the North's engines.

Meanwhile, South Korea's Defense

Minister Shin Won-sik told reporters in February that the Malligyong-1 appears to be orbiting Earth without activity, suggesting the satellite is not functioning properly.

The South's military has recently strengthened monitoring of Tongchang-ri in the North's northwestern coast, where its satellite launch site is located, after detecting signs of launch preparations.

Equipment used to measure and assess the launch trajectory of a space rocket is said to have been detected at the site, indicating that the North's

launch could take place soon.

The suspected preparations come ahead of major diplomatic events involving South Korea, raising concern the North may time the launch to coincide with one of them to maximize its political impact.

The leaders of South Korea, China and Japan will meet for a trilateral summit in Seoul on Monday, while the defense chiefs of South Korea, the United States and Japan will hold trilateral talks during a security forum in Singapore set to take place from May 31-June 2. (Yonhap)