

Race Is On To Salvage Mars Probe

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The Federal Space Agency raced on Thursday to salvage Fobos-Grunt, a spacecraft bound for the Martian moon Phobos that is stranded in Earth's orbit, with just days left before the window closes on Russia's first interplanetary mission in 15 years.

✘ So far controllers have failed to establish contact with the \$163 million, unmanned probe, leaving little hope of recovering the ambitious mission that was to reassert the nation's place at the front lines of space exploration.

✘ Following the launch from the Baikonur launch pad in Kazakhstan early on Wednesday, the Fobos-Grunt probe is stuck in a dangerously low orbit, creating a drag that could eventually send it crashing back to Earth.

✘ The Federal Space Agency said it had at least three days to fix the problem and steer the craft onto its correct path, and will make another attempt when it passes over Baikonur later today, a spokesman said.

✘ Failure so soon after liftoff in the three-year mission to bring back soil — "grunt" in Russian — from the Martian moon would be a major blow to the pride of the Russian space

industry, adding to a humiliating series of setbacks.

✘ Experts say the post-launch problems are linked to the craft's on-board flight computer, which failed to fire two engine burns to send it on its trajectory toward Mars.

✘ There is a small chance that the software could be reprogrammed, if controllers can link with the craft. But if the troubles are hardware-related, the mission is likely a failure, industry sources said.

✘ "In my opinion Fobos-Grunt is lost," Vladimir Uvarov, a former chief Russian military expert on space, told the state-run Rossiiskaya Gazeta.

✘ If Fobos-Grunt cannot be bounced out of orbit, the massive craft will eventually crash back to Earth with a full payload of toxic hydrazine and nitrogen tetroxide fuel and small cargo of radioactive cobalt-57.

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