

M'sia considers signing space liability convention, more space treaties

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Malaysia is considering signing three additional UN conventions on outer space activities, including one that would hold states fully liable for damages caused by the objects they launched into space.

In a statement today, the Science, Technology and Innovation Ministry (Mosti) said Malaysia has already signed two of the five UN space conventions but has yet to ratify them.

“For the purposes of protecting and safeguarding security and national sovereignty, to date, Malaysia has signed two of the five outer space agreements or conventions under the UN.

“Meanwhile, the process of ratifying or joining all of those agreements or conventions is being considered in line with national interest,” the ministry said.

The statement comes as suspected debris from a Chinese rocket has been reported across Southeast Asia over the past week.

The two treaties that have been signed but not ratified are the Outer Space Treaty 1967 and the Rescue Agreement 1968.

The additional treaties being considered are the Space Liability Convention 1972, the Registration Convention 1976, and the Moon Treaty 1979.

Under Article VII of the Outer Space Treaty, countries that launch an object into space, and countries that host the launch facility that was used, are internationally liable for the damages it might cause.

The Space Liability Convention expands on this provision. It stipulates that the launching state is “absolutely liable” for such damages.

Absolute liability means the launching countries - without exception, even if they are not at fault – must pay compensation for damages caused by their space activities.

China has already ratified the Outer Space Treaty and the Space Liability Convention.

On July 31, Mosti and the Malaysian Space Agency said debris from a Chinese rocket had re-entered the earth’s atmosphere and crossed Malaysian airspace in

the Sulu Sea and Sarawak. Bright fireballs were sighted over Sarawak as the debris made its re-entry.

The Long March 5B was launched on July 24 to deliver a laboratory module to the new Chinese space station under construction in orbit.

Instead of making a controlled re-entry, however, it appears to have made an uncontrolled re-entry. The US accused China of failing to share information on the rocket's trajectory with the international community, which is needed to predict where the rocket might fall.

Reports of suspected debris from the rocket subsequently turned up in Sarawak, Indonesia, and the Philippines. While China has not confirmed whether the debris was part of its rocket, a Business Insider report yesterday quoted experts saying they are certain the debris came from the Chinese rocket.

Meanwhile, a Malaysian government team has been dispatched to retrieve the suspected debris in Kampung Nyalau, Bintulu and Kampung Sepupok Lama, Niah, Miri, both in Sarawak.

Mosti said on Aug 2 that the multiagency effort has thus far ascertained that the objects are not radioactive and is safe to undergo further analysis to determine

whether they are parts of China's rocket.

"Findings of the investigation and analysis will be notified, and appropriate follow-up action will be considered in line with Act 834 (Malaysia Space Board Act 2022) and international treaties regarding space (activities) under the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs," it said.

According to Business Insider, this is the third time a Long March 5B rocket has made an uncontrolled re-entry. In May 2020, debris from the second incident damaged several buildings when it landed in two villages on the Ivory Coast, but no injuries were reported.

Last month, a study estimated there is roughly a 10 percent chance that uncontrolled rocket re-entries will kill at least one person over a decade. The study assumes current practices remain unchanged.

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