Unmanned European rocket explodes on first flight

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KOUROU, French Guiana (CNN) --
Europe's newest unmanned satellite-launching rocket, the Ariane 5, intentionally was blown up Tuesday just seconds after taking off on its maiden flight.

A spokesman for Arianespace said the rocket was destroyed by its controllers.

"It's been confirmed that the vehicle was deliberately destroyed by the safety people," said spokesman Ian Pryke. "Why? I don't know. There were no, repeat no, injuries. Most of the debris came down in the mangroves and the sea, and the winds carried the fumes away from the people out over the sea."

The rocket soared from its launch pad in French Guiana on the northeastern shoulder of South America at 1233 GMT. About 30 seconds later, an explosion lit up the cloudy skies, and fiery debris cascaded toward Earth. (918K QuickTime movie)

The European Space Agency had touted the Ariane 5 as a new age in commercial satellite technology.

"It's a disappointment but we have to bounce back. Life goes on," said Arianespace President Claude Bigot.

Arianespace, the space agency's commercial satellite launching arm, is backed by 53 European shareholders and dominates about 60 percent of the world's commercial satellite launch market.

Ariane 5's original lift-off had been delayed for about an hour because
of low cloud cover before officials gave it the go-ahead.

Aboard Ariane 5 was Cluster -- a $500 million set of four identical scientific satellites that were designed to to establish precisely how the Earth's magnetic field interacts with solar winds.

The unmanned rocket was on its first voyage after years of intense development by some of Europe's leading scientists. The explosion was a setback for Arianespace, whose previous models of the Ariane rocket had been some of the most reliable vehicles for satellite launches.

The European Space Agency estimated that total development of Ariane 5 cost more than $8 billion.

*The Associated Press and Reuters contributed to this report.*

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