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Controversy widens over Korean space agency

Sacheon, Daejeon still at odds over location of space agency

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Uncertainty is growing over the government's plan to establish a control tower agency overseeing the nation's space policies, after President Yoon Suk-yeol hinted at possible changes to the plan during last Wednesday's press conference held to mark his first 100 days in office.

When the president said at the press conference that the government will establish a space agency emulating the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), he used the term, "Space and Aeronautics Administration," instead of the term, "Aeronautics and Space Administration" which he had used since the presidential campaign. The latter term was also used when his administration announced in May its 110 key national tasks to pursue.

The Ministry of Science and ICT, which is supposed to oversee the new agency, has urged the administration to focus more on space policies than aviation policies under the supervision of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport.

Considering the fact that the aviation industry cluster in Sacheon, South Gyeongsang Province, has enabled the city to be chosen as home to the space agency, the administration's latest decision to prioritize space policies has aroused speculation about possible changes to the agency's location.

In addition, Yoon did not men-



President Yoon Suk-yeol delivers a speech at the Korea Aerospace Research Institute in Daejeon in this July 6 file photo.

Korea Times photo by Seo Jae-hoon

tion Sacheon at the press conference, while promising that the city of Daejeon, which accommodates the Korea Aerospace Research Institute (KARI), will be in charge of space research and training experts under the "triangular framework" for space policies. He just said that South Gyeongsang Province will focus on the satellite industry and that South Jeolla Province, home to the Naro Space Center, will focus on the rocket industry.

Before the press conference, the science ministry did not include Daejeon among the candidates for the aerospace industry cluster, despite the city government's continuous requests to place the space agency there. The KARI union has also argued that the agency should be located in Daejeon's neighboring city of Sejong, Korea's de facto administrative capital, where most government ministries and

agencies are based.

Daejeon's city government and residents therefore welcomed the president's remarks, expressing hope for the possibility of the space agency coming to the city. In contrast, the municipal governments of Sacheon and South Gyeongsang Province, as well as South Jeolla Province, expressed concern about the weaker roles of their aerospace industry clusters.

The opposition party, the Democratic Party of Korea, urged the government to clarify the direction of its space policies.

"The science ministry has maintained the stance that it will only choose the South Jeolla and South Gyeongsang Provinces as the locations for the aerospace industry clusters," said Rep. Jo Seung-lae of the Democratic Party of Korea, who

represents Daejeon.

The lawmaker also pointed out that the government should reconsider its plan to establish the space agency in Sacheon from scratch by reviewing each region's infrastructure and competitiveness, as well as listening to opinions from experts.

Amid the controversy, the government will reportedly form a taskforce for the establishment of the space agency in the near future.

First Vice Science Minister Oh Tae-seog also told reporters on Aug. 4 that the ministry is in talks with the Ministry of the Interior and Safety about when to set up the space agency in Sacheon. Science Minister Lee Jong-ho met with NASA Administrator Bill Nelson in Washington, D.C., on Aug. 1 to get his advice on the roles of the space agency.