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Hanwha's plan to acquire space tech hits snag

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State-sponsored space rocket researchers, who tried to join Hanwha Aerospace, were referred to prosecutors last week for alleged industrial espionage, according to the government and sources familiar with this matter, Tuesday.

The accusation is expected to increase uncertainties surrounding Hanwha Aerospace's plan to acquire government technology used to develop the KSLV-II, better known as Nuri, Korea's first domestically developed space launch vehicle that went into space successfully last year.

On Monday, the Ministry of Science and ICT texted reporters that it had asked for an investigation into the

Korea Aerospace Research Institute (KARI), following its inspection of the state-run aerospace research institute.

After former KARI President Cho Kwang-rae joined Hanwha Aerospace as its chief technology officer in September and around 10 researchers indicated their intention to leave, the ministry has been inspecting them, citing risk of possible technologies leaks.

Four among them are said to have been referred to prosecutors for allegedly taking data storage devices from KARI headquarters in Daejeon. Some of them reportedly retracted their plans to move to Hanwha Aerospace.

Cho has denounced the science ministry, regarding its inspection as retaliatory against KARI, which has protested the government's plan to set up the Korea Aerospace

Administration. However, the ministry refuted his claim, saying that its inspection was based on the law.

After the ministry inspected the KARI researchers, Hanwha Aerospace rescinded its attempts at recruiting them.

"Basically we will not hire those involved in alleged leakage of technologies," the company official said. "There will be no problem to our contract with the government regarding the transfer of technologies used to develop the Nuri space rocket."

Last December, Hanwha Aerospace was chosen as the company to lead the project for upgrading the domestically developed launch vehicle. KARI will transfer its technologies to Hanwha Aerospace, during preparations for the fourth Nuri launch.

However, it could be difficult for the company to achieve its goal without experts from KARI.

"To transfer the entire space launch vehicle technologies, there is no doubt that the company needs a workforce that understands the technologies," Rep. Cho Seung-rae of the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea said in a recent parliamentary audit. The Science and Technology Policy Institute also said in a report that the surest way to transfer technologies from state-run research institutes to private enterprises is the movement of experts.

Independent lawmaker Rep. Park Wan-joo raised a question on whether the government really has the intention to hand over its technologies to the private sector.