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S. Korean military salvages NK space rocket wreckage

The South Korean military has retrieved a sunken part of an ill-fated North Korean space rocket from the Yellow Sea, officials said Friday, capping a weeklong salvage operation hamstrung by poor underwater visibility, fast currents and other obstacles.

It raised the wreckage, presumed to be part of the rocket's second stage, Thursday evening, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said, amid expectations that a probe into it could shed light on the progress of the North's long-range rocket development program.

On May 31, the North fired what it claimed to be the new "Chollima-1" rocket carrying a military reconnaissance satellite, "Malligyong-1," but it crashed into the sea due to the abnormal starting of the second-stage engine, according to its state media.

On the same day, the South Korean military identified the wreckage when it splashed into the waters some 200 kilometers west of the western island of Eocheong. But it

dropped to the sea floor at a depth of 75 meters due in part to its heavy weight.

The lifted wreckage was around 12 meters long — shorter than previously thought — and 2 to 3 meters in diameter. The large portion of the rocket, thought to be about 30 meters long in total, could help elucidate how far North Korea's rocket technology has come, observers said.

For the retrieval operation, the Navy deployed a group of specially trained divers and some 10 vessels, including two salvage and rescue ships, the ROKS Tongyeong and the ROKS Gwangyang, as well as the ROKS Cheonghaejin submarine rescue ship, and multiple maritime aircraft.

The painstaking operation was fraught with a set of challenges, including inclement underwater weather conditions, like visibility of just 50 centimeters, as the Navy prioritized the safety of divers and other personnel, according to a JCS official.

"The Yellow Sea by nature has fast currents and poor visibility," S. Cpo.



The South Korean military revisits a part of North Korea's ill-fated "Chollima-1" rocket at the Navy's 2nd Fleet Command in Pyeongyang on South Korea's west coast, Friday.

Joint Press Corps

Shin Gyoung-jun, a Navy deep-sea diver who took part in the salvage operations, said. "(We) virtually had to carry out operations through just the feel of our hands."

The military unveiled to reporters the cylindrical wreckage on the deck of the ROKS Gwangyang at the Navy's Second Fleet in Pyeongyang, 60 kilometers south of Seoul. (Yonhap)