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Mars Exploration Rover-A (MER-A), the first of two NASA science missions being launched this month, has begun its journey to Mars after successfully being deployed to space today by a Boeing [NYSE: BA] Delta II rocket.

The Delta II lifted off from Space Launch Complex 17A, Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, Fla., at an instantaneous window of 1:58:47 p.m. EDT. Approximately 37 minutes later, the spacecraft carrying MER-A separated from the launch vehicle.

MER-A is scheduled to land on Mars on Jan. 4, 2004.

"Launching at the instantaneous window is certainly an important factor in contributing to the success of NASA's Mars Exploration Rover missions. I'm proud of the efforts by the government and industry team that made today's launch successful, and that the Delta II continues to be called upon by NASA to support these important science missions," said Jay Witzling, vice president and deputy program manager, Boeing Delta programs.

Following a parachute and air bag landing, MER-A will begin roaming and will activate a panoramic camera to image the surface and sky of Mars. Using precision instruments, the Rover will examine samples of the Martian terrain to help scientists determine if past water activity could have supported life on Mars. Communication with scientists on Earth will be enhanced by use of the Mars Odyssey spacecraft as a relay station, which is orbiting Mars.

MER-B, the second of the two missions, is scheduled to launch on June 25 from Cape Canaveral aboard the new Delta II Heavy launch vehicle. It is scheduled to land on Mars on Jan. 25, 2004 and will perform similar tasks as MER-A.

NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory and Kennedy Space Center manage the MER missions that are part of NASA's Mars Exploration Program, a long-term effort of robotic exploration of Mars.

Boeing has successfully launched all of NASA's Mars probes and rovers aboard Delta II launch vehicles.

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For further information:

Robert Villanueva

Boeing Expendable Launch Systems

(714) 372-2089

(714) 330-1781

robert.s.villanueva@boeing.com

Madonna Walsh

Boeing IDS News Bureau

(314) 234-1362

(314) 705-0717

madonna.a.walsh@boeing.com
