



Downcourt press

staff photo by Jorge Casari

Jackie Jones, left, and Lynette Joiner along with the rest of the Texas A&M women's basketball team were busy practicing Thursday in G. Rollie White coliseum. The

Aggie Ladies play the University of Texas in Austin on Saturday. The team's next home game is Monday vs. Texas Tech.

Officials verify leak in shuttle's engine

United Press International
CAPE CANAVERAL — Officials say there definitely is a fuel leak in space shuttle Challenger's main engine system, and detective work needed to find the elusive leak may delay the craft's maiden flight until late March.

That delay in turn guarantees additional delays in two subsequent shuttle flights and threatens plans for an international Spacelab mission Sept. 30. Officials said a 24-second test firing of the three main engines Tuesday proved the flammable hydrogen gas found in the shuttle's tail section during a similar firing Dec. 18 came from a fuel leak within the engine system.

It was a discovery officials had hoped not to make, because an internal leak could pose a fire hazard during a real launch. Just where the leak is remains a mystery that has baffled engineers since December, despite their best efforts.

Lt. Gen. James Abrahamson, associate NASA administrator, said he hopes a detailed analysis of data from special instruments installed for Tuesday's test will

show at least which engine is leaking.

"That will be a real detective job, and one that will be difficult," he told a news conference.

Asked after the news conference how much delay he expected, Abrahamson replied: "Two weeks minimum. I would say between that and three to four weeks."

Challenger — second in America's fleet of space freighters — originally had been scheduled to blast off on its five-day first flight Monday, carrying astronauts Paul Weitz, Karol Bobko, Donald Peterson and Story Musgrave.

After the hydrogen buildup was found in December, however, the launch was postponed until late February so Tuesday's repeat test could be conducted.

Abrahamson said a third test firing may be required. He said it might even be necessary to remove one of Challenger's engines and take it to a special test site at Bay St. Louis, Miss., for a checkout — a task that would take three to four weeks.

At worst, Abrahamson said, all three of Challenger's engines might have to be removed and

replaced with the slightly more powerful engines from the Columbia, which has five successful missions.

Abrahamson said the date can be set until the leak is located and fixed, or a way can be found to lean hydrogen buildup from a fire hazard.

Challenger's main engine, a large tracking and data satellite, was removed Tuesday's test and will not be back aboard until the leak is solved, he said.

That tracking satellite, another like it, originally was scheduled to go up in June on Challenger's third flight. These be in place to provide continuous orbital coverage before Challenger's launch on a fourth mission, carrying Spacelab and a national crew of six, as well as a

Abrahamson said he hopes to achieve the launch of Spacelab. But that more knowledge time is crucial. The cause the latest delay in Challenger's first flight also will delay the ship's second and third missions.

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