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SOVIET SL-12 BOOSTER DIFFICULTIES CONTINUE

The Soviet space program suffered another setback on 23 September when an SL-12 launch vehicle failed in flight. The SL-12, which the Soviets probably intend to use as the general-purpose booster for their earth orbital, lunar, and interplanetary programs through the 1970s, has fully performed its mission only six out of fifteen times.

The latest failure occurred during an attempt to send an unmanned probe to the moon. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The Soviets announced the launching as Cosmos 300, an "...earth satellite...designed for carrying on space research...." The real mission of the probe probably was to land on the moon and perform experiments.

The last two previous SL-12 launches--Luna 15 and Zond 7--were successful and may have led the Soviets to believe that they had solved the earlier problems with the booster. The recent failure will further delay Soviet plans for a manned circum-lunar mission using the SL-12.

By comparison, the US Saturn I, which has about the same payload capability as the SL-12, has performed successfully 15 times in as many launches.

In addition to the disappointment that this poor performance has generated among Soviet space officials, the program is expensive to maintain. One SL-12 booster probably costs about \$45 million when measured in US-dollar terms not counting the payload, and over-all development costs have already reached some \$2 billion. [REDACTED]

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