

China plans Wednesday launch for moon orbiter

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- *From:* John Schutkeker <jschutkeker@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>
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BEIJING (Reuters) – China's preparations to launch its first lunar orbiter are on schedule for lift-off later this week, a Chinese official said on Monday, as the country steps up efforts in a new international race for the moon.

The launch of the Chang'e One orbiter is set for Wednesday at 1000 GMT but could take place on the two days after then, depending on conditions, spokesman for the China National Space Administration, Li Guoping, told a news conference.

Li said the orbiter would circle the moon for over a year, mapping and analyzing its surface.

"It's implementation will lay a technological foundation for our country's development of deep space exploration activities," Li said of the launch.

The United States, Japan and India are also seeking to mark their interest in the moon with fresh exploration efforts.

In 2003, China became only the third country — after the United States and the former Soviet Union — to launch a man into space aboard its own rocket. In October 2005, it sent two men into orbit and it plans a space walk by 2008.

Beijing plans to follow the Chang'e One orbiter — named after a mythical Chinese goddess who flew to the moon — with a moon rover mission, probably in 2012.

Last month, Japan launched its first lunar probe.

India is planning its first unmanned mission to orbit the moon in 2008.

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The United States plans to launch a lunar orbiter next year.