VEGA LIGHT ROCKET MAKES SIXTH SUCCESSFUL LAUNCH

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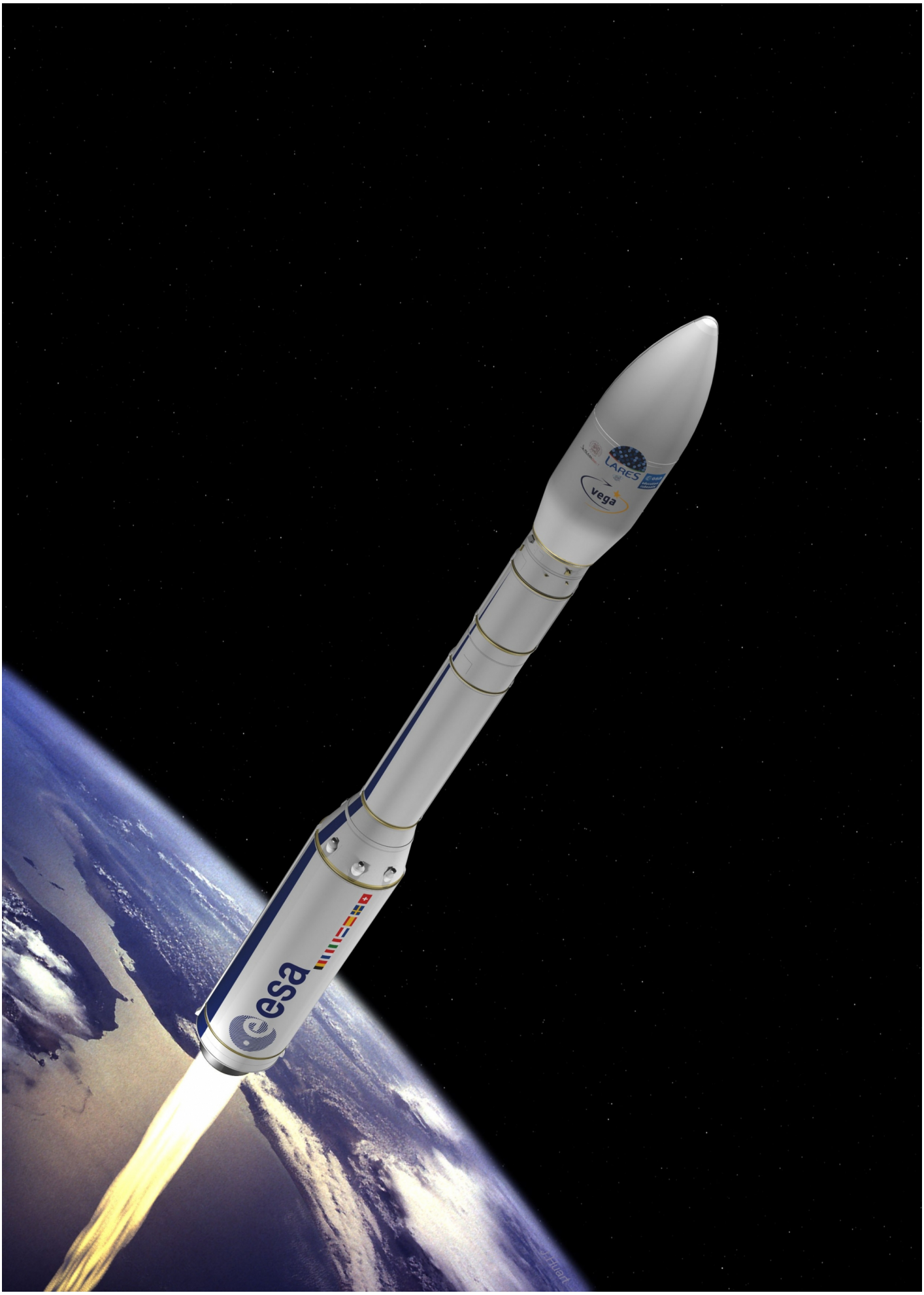

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The European Space Agency's **Vega light rocket** has made its **sixth successful launch**, from Kourou, French Guiana with a payload to test high-precision measurement technologies scientists hope will pave the way for the detection of so-far undiscovered gravitational waves.

The 1h 45min flight VV06 put the Airbus Defence & Space-built LISA Pathfinder into an elliptic Earth orbit, from which its propulsion will take it to Sun-Earth Lagrange point L1, 1.5 million km away. "This was not a routine launch, because of its special trajectory but also because of the very special payload," says ESA's science and robotic exploration director Alvaro Giménez.

The rocket's sweet spot is to place a 1.5t payload into a 750km (466 mile) orbit, ideal for Earth observation or scientific missions. Vega's multi-payload adaptor and restartable upper stage allow for a mix of large and small payloads.

This sixth mission was significant as the final flight in a demonstration series to showcase the vehicle's flexibility and versatility in a variety of mission types.

Stéphane Israël, chief executive of European launch operator Arianespace, says the launcher is ready to be declared fully operational: "Vega is keeping up with all its promises. From a technical standpoint first thanks to its flawless record so far and to its versatility, truly demonstrated by the variety of missions it is able to address.

"Thanks also to the successful ramp-up operated in 2015, with three launches performed in one single year," he says.

Vega Flight VV06 was the 11th launch with an Arianespace family vehicle in 2015, keeping the company on target to match its record pace of 12 missions from Kourou during a year. So far, Vega has flown three times, Ariane 5 six times and Soyuz twice.

Launch 12 is scheduled for 17 December. Soyuz Flight VS13 will orbit two more satellites for Europe's Galileo navigation system.

Vega is built by Italian prime contractor ELV, a joint venture between Avio and the nation's space agency, ASI.

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