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## New commercial Russian rocket booster makes debut

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**MOSCOW (AP) -- Russia's premier aerospace company has developed a range of booster rockets in a bid to hold onto its share of the world's market for commercial launches, its director said Tuesday.**

The Khrunichev State Research and Production Center developed the Rokot booster rocket converted from a Soviet-designed SS-19 ballistic missile -- that on Sunday put twin U.S.-German satellites into orbit.

The unmanned spacecraft, nicknamed Tom and Jerry, will fly in tandem to create what scientists will be the most accurate map ever of the Earth's gravitational field.

Khrunichev's director Alexander Medvedev said the contract to launch the two Grace satellites his company about \$10 million, which was barely above production cost.

"We have to charge bottom price to enter the market," he said at a news conference.

Medvedev said that the launch price could be increased later as Rokot wins a market niche. Another three Rokot launches are set for this year.

Khrunichev built the Rokot by fitting the SS-19 with a new Breeze-KM main engine. A version of the engine will also be used to power the Proton-M, an upgraded version of Khrunichev's Proton rocket in service since 1965.

Thanks to the heavy-lift Proton, Khrunichev has become the top cash cow for the beleaguered Russian space industry, putting commercial satellites -- mostly from other countries -- into geostationary orbits throughout the 1990s.

Russia receives tens of millions of dollars for each launch, a coveted revenue source for an industry struggling to survive on a fraction of generous Soviet-era state funding.

Medvedev blamed the sluggish global market for commercial space launches for last year's small number of Proton launches. Khrunichev only launched two Western satellites into orbit at the end of last year. Medvedev said another two commercial launches set for last fall had been postponed this year due to problems with satellites.

Medvedev said his company had invested part of the earnings from commercial launches in research and development works for Rokot, Proton-M and the next-generation Angara rocket.

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Khrunichev has also paid for upgrading the crumbling Soviet-era infrastructure of the Baiko cosmodrome, which Russia leases from the ex-Soviet republic of Kazakhstan, and Russia's o Plesetsk cosmodrome used for Sunday's launch.

Medveded said Khrunichev paid for a backup power system at the Baikonur after the Kazak authorities once cut power to the launchpad minutes before a scheduled commercial liftoff.

"Such incidents can land you in the madhouse," he said.

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