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Internal rift at KARI feared to adversely affect Korea's aerospace program

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The government initiative to fortify space programs is showing rapid signs of weakening, a concern escalated by a series of resignations offered by key senior researchers at the Korea Aerospace Research Institute (KARI), the developer of the Nuri space rocket, or KSLV-II. The Nuri is a three-stage launch vehicle, and the nation's second rocket after the Naro-1.

Senior researchers have taken extreme offense at the recent organizational restructuring of the science ministry-supervised institute, in what they have characterized as the debilitating and insulting dismembering of the dignified organization central to elevating the country's scientific profile.

The finance ministry has yet to revise its Dec. 12 plan to split a 243-strong department within the institute overseeing the launch vehicle into one led by Ko Jeong-hwan. According to the plan, the head of KARI's Korea Space Launch Vehicle II R&D directorate will be left with five non-research officials. He offered to resign the following day, along with five senior peers.

Young researchers, however, say the seemingly justified act of protest is not shared by the rest of the sci-



Ko Jeong-hwan, the head of KARI's Korea Space Launch Vehicle II R&D directorate, left, and KARI Principal Researcher Ok Ho-nam.



tific community, since a more agile structure could also lead to higher productivity in processing a greater number of projects.

The most recent of the related resignations was offered on Dec. 16 by Ok Ho-nam, KARI's principal researcher for 29 years. The head of the Naro Space Center in Goheung, South Jeolla Province, said he deeply regretted that he would "no longer be able to help the country prepare for the successful launch of the Nuri 3."

His proposed resignation made headlines late Monday, only hours after Minister of Science and ICT Lee Jong-ho expressed hope that the internal dispute over the organiza-

tional restructuring of KARI would find an amicable resolution.

The comment was in direct reference to resignations offered Dec. 15 by six senior KARI researchers, including Ko. Observers say the senior researchers would not likely return to work, as they see the new structure as an insult intended to erase years of their hard work and efforts.

"For senior workers, the new structure can be an indication of an unnecessary and grueling government audit and meddling," an industry observer said.

"The offering of resignations is understandable, given that they reportedly had to undergo govern-

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ment scrutiny beyond imagination when they failed in the Nuri's first launch vehicle mission in 2021. It is more of a move seeking autonomy with an undertone of continued pent-up frustrations."

KARI is in the process of retracting the resignations of Ko and Ok, to better prepare for the Nuri 3 launch next year.