

Deadly Elon Musk Starship breaks up in space and disrupts air traffic

Onlookers in Caribbean islands of Turks and Caicos capture videos of the rocket's debris up above them

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Debris from SpaceX rocket, launched in Texas, spotted over Turks and Caicos Islands Credit: Marcus Haworth@marcusahaworth

Elon Musk's Starship prototype has broken up during its seventh launch attempt, sending fiery debris streaking through the sky above the Caribbean and grounding nearby aircraft.

Mr Musk's SpaceX carried out a launch of the superheavy rocket from Boca Chica in Texas on Thursday night with the aim of undertaking a series of stress tests to push its launch vehicle to its limit.

However, in an unexpected setback, SpaceX lost the upper portion of the Starship rocket, which exploded minutes after it blasted off.

About eight minutes into the mission, SpaceX lost communication with Starship, with launch commentators eventually saying that the vehicle had been destroyed.



SpaceX's mishap caused widespread disruptions to air traffic.

At Miami International Airport, some flights were grounded. At least 20 commercial flights diverted to other airports or altered course to avoid potential debris, based on flight records from tracking website FlightRadar24.



Object 2

The Federal Aviation Administration, which regulates private launch activities in the US, said it was assessing the situation.

Meanwhile, onlookers in the Caribbean islands of the Turks and Caicos captured stunning videos of the rocket breaking up above them. Some footage was captured from the cabins of nearby jets, which were forced into holding to steer clear of the potential hazard.

SpaceX said: "Starship experienced a rapid unscheduled disassembly during its ascent burn. Teams will continue to review data from today's flight test to better understand root cause."

The mission comes just hours after Jeff Bezos celebrated the launch of New Glenn, a rocket built by his rival company Blue Origin. New Glenn reached orbit for the first time.

The two entrepreneurs have been locked in a race to extend human civilisation beyond planet Earth, with Mr Musk claiming he wants to make life “multiplanetary” and Mr Bezos stating the aim of colonising space with “millions” of people.

Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos have been locked in a race to extend human civilisation beyond planet Earth Credit: AFP via Getty Images

Series of changes to Starship’s design

The SpaceX mission on Thursday debuted a series of changes to Starship’s design in an attempt to deliver a dummy payload of satellites into space for the first time. The company has tweaked various flaps and tiles on the craft to test its resilience.

SpaceX said the ship’s “reentry profile is being designed to intentionally stress the structural limits” of the rocket’s flaps while “at the point of maximum entry dynamic pressure”.

The rocket successfully caught its booster on Thursday, causing Mr Musk to celebrate on his platform X. He tweeted: “We caught the rocket!”

We caught the rocket!! 🚀

pic.twitter.com/gVv34W9l2n pic.twitter.com/o0vA3XXi8L

— Elon Musk (@elonmusk) January 16, 2025

On its fifth mission in October, Mr Musk’s company successfully recovered the company’s booster rocket for the first time, catching it with a pair of mechanical “chopsticks” as it fell from the sky.



Object 1

On its sixth, the booster rocket failed to return to the tower and crashed into the sea.

The 400ft rocket reused an engine recovered from an earlier mission for the first time in a bid to demonstrate the craft's reusability.

SpaceX's rockets are intended to be fully reusable to lower costs, a model already demonstrated by the company's Falcon 9 rockets.