

United Nations develops Armageddon-style asteroid contingency plan

REID CRANFILL | STAFF WRITER

At the insistence of former astronauts, the United Nations has decided to formulate an international action plan to deal with rogue asteroids headed toward Earth. The treaty would delegate responsibilities for stopping an asteroid, set the policies for what risks could be taken to prevent a collision, and coordinate relief efforts in the event of a strike.

The very idea seems fetched from bad '90s action movies, but currently NASA is tracking 127 Near Earth Objects (NEOs) that could strike the planet. Not all NEOs are large enough to destroy life on Earth, but an asteroid just a few hundred meters wide could easily wipe out a major city or create an enormous tsunami.

Rather than destroy any incoming asteroid, plans call to deflect an NEO's trajectory a few degrees away from Earth.

"All you'd have to do is slow the object down just a few millimeters per second, and over time, you'd change its path enough to where it'd miss (us)," said John Yeoman of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory to the BBC.

The asteroid, Apophis, which is due to miss the Earth just barely in 2029, could be deflected merely by having a one-ton spaceship fly beside it for 12 days. The gravity from the ship would be enough to draw the asteroid away from the earth by a planet's radius.

But such plans come with potentially disastrous political consequences. In trying to deflect Apophis from possibly hitting Seattle, NASA's plan could accidentally destroy Beijing and provoke war with China.

"It's important to understand when you start to deflect an asteroid that certain countries are going to have accept

an increase in risk to their populations in order to take the risk to zero for everyone," said Dr. Russell Schweickart to the BBC.

Schweickart is an Apollo 9 astronaut and founder of the Association of Space Explorers (ASE), a society of astronauts and cosmonauts that proposed the treaty to the United Nations. The ASE plans to have a working protocol to present to the United Nations by 2009.

In the United States, Congress has changed NASA's mandate to include identifying potential asteroid strikes, and plans to invest in a new network of telescopes to identify any incoming asteroid larger than 70 meters in diameter. Currently, NASA estimates around 20,000 asteroids are inbound that have yet to be identified.

"It all depends on how much warning we have; there's a lot of space out there," said assistant professor of physics Don Smith. "The real danger is if (an NEO) isn't identified before it's too close."

NASA's estimates require at least seven years before any deflection mission would be ready for launch, and agencies that are more conservative estimate 12 years at the earliest. With the new telescope array, it should be possible to give such a mission the time it would need to develop. Still, the ASE feels that having a set United Nations protocol before a crisis develops could save crucial time in preparing a mission.

Schweickart told the BBC: "You have to act when things look like they are going to happen. If you wait until you know for certain, it's too late."

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Army grants waivers to criminals

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The increase in allowing criminals calls into question some of the military's practices, in particular their "don't ask, don't tell" stance on homosexuality.

"That's just ridiculous, giving jobs and guns to criminals when a person who happens to be gay is willing to take that job makes no sense," Febiger said.

Aaron Belkin, director of the Michael D. Palm Center, an institution which researches the army's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, also believes this situation is ridiculous and dangerous.

"The chance that one of those individuals is going to commit an atrocity or disobey an order is higher," Belkin told The New York Times.

Sophomore Saron Smith-Hardin thinks that the increase in criminals allows people who might have attempted

murder as a civilian the chance to kill in an environment where it is deemed acceptable.

"My main concern is that some of these people have attempted murder. However, in the army you are expected to kill, particularly during a war," Smith-Hardin said.

On the other hand, joining the army might have positive affects on convicted criminals.

"It's possible that there might be

benefits for the criminals who join. Going into the army teaches and reinforces discipline," said Febiger.

Still, there are risks involved.

John D. Hutson, dean and president of the Franklin Pierce Law Center, said to The New York Times, "If you are recruiting somebody who has demonstrated some sort of antisocial behavior and then you are putting a gun in their hands, you have to be awfully careful about what you are doing."