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# Space mission aims to unravel mysteries of Northern Lights

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US scientists announced plans here for an ambitious multi-satellite launch aimed at unravelling the mysteries of the Northern and Southern Lights.

Under a 200-million-dollar project hatched by NASA and scientists at the University of California, Berkeley, five satellites will be loaded onto a rocket and launched from Cape Canaveral on February 15.

The project aims to discover when, where and why solar wind stored in magnetic fields in the Earth's upper atmosphere is released, propelling showers of electrons that create shimmering multi-colored light shows.

The two-year project is called THEMIS -- Time History of Events and Macroscale Interactions during Substorms -- named after the blindfolded Greek goddess of order and justice.

"There are few more awe-inspiring sights than the colorful and dynamic beauty of the Northern Lights," said Frank Snow, THEMIS project manager.

"This is a challenging project that will replace old myths with scientific explanations for the lights' visible evidence of the earth's magnetosphere protecting us from the fatal effects of the solar wind."

Previous single-satellite investigations have been unable to pinpoint the exact origin of the substorms.

The THEMIS project aims to settle scientific debate by dispatching five satellites that will align in their orbits every four days, allowing the first comprehensive look at the substorms and their triggering of auroral eruptions.

"We believe this project will usher in a new era of understanding about the nature of sun-earth connections," said Vassilis Angelopoulos, THEMIS principal investigator.

"For over thirty years the source of these storms has been sought with great fervor, the search is as old as the field of space physics itself."

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