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Columbia shuttle breaks up over Texas

Seven astronauts were aboard

Saturday, February 1, 2003 Posted: 12:02 PM EST (1702 GMT)

HOUSTON, Texas (CNN) -- The space shuttle Columbia broke up as it descended over Texas Saturday toward a planned landing at Kennedy Space Center in Florida, showering debris across southeastern Texas and into Louisiana.

Police in Nacogdoches, Texas, reported "numerous pieces of debris" both inside the city limits and in Nacogdoches County.

"Information is really sketchy," Det. Greg Sowell said. "We want people to stay away, because some of it could be toxic."

Sowell said officers and city and county employees were being dispatched to stand by the debris until the arrival of FBI and NASA representatives. The debris field is believed to be very large.

Residents as far east as Shreveport, Louisiana, reported seeing and feeling an apparent explosion.

"As we seen [Columbia] coming over, we seen a lot of light and it looked like debris and stuff was coming off the shuttle," Kemp, Texas, resident Benjamin Laster told CNN.

"We seen large masses of pieces coming off from the shuttle as it was coming by," Laster said. Then, "the house kind of shook and we noticed a sonic boom ... and then we seen a big continuous puff of vapor or smoke stream come out and then we noticed a



(AMATEUR PHOTOGRAPHS)

The shuttle Columbia was captured by an amateur photographer as it flew over Dallas, Texas, on Saturday morning, on its way to a planned landing at the Kennedy Space Center.

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VIDEO

CNN's Miles O'Brien uses amateur photos to explain what happened with space shuttle Columbia Saturday morning. (February 1)
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Video shows what is apparently something falling off the space shuttle as Columbia launched (February



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big chunk go over."

Search-and-rescue teams from the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, area were alerted and residents were urged to stay away from any possible debris from the shuttle, which may be hazardous, said NASA public affairs officer James Hartfield.

Shuttle commander Rick D. Husband, Pilot William C. McCool, Payload Commander Michael P. Anderson, Mission Specialists David M. Brown, Kalpana Chawla and Laurel Clark and Israel's first astronaut, Ilan Ramon, were on board.

President Bush was briefed at Camp David, Maryland, and cut short his stay at the retreat to return to the White House.

The administration was preparing to convene a "domestic event" conference among all domestic and military agencies that may be involved in the next step.

An administration official said the shuttle's altitude – over 200,000 feet – made it "highly unlikely" that the shuttle fell victim to a terrorist act.

"We have no information at this time that indicates that this was a terrorism incident," said Gordon Johndroe, press secretary for the Department of Homeland Security. "Obviously, the investigation is just beginning, but that is what we know now."

Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge went to the White House shortly after hearing the report.

NASA officials at the Johnson Space Center in Houston said they last had contact with the shuttle about 9 a.m. EST, and it had been expected to touch down at about 9:16 a.m. EST.

Video of the shuttle tracking over Dallas showed multiple vapor trails, but NASA spokesman Kyle Herring said it was too early to determine the source.

Steve Petrovich, a police officer in Palestine, Texas, said he heard "a rumble and boom" at about 8 a.m. CDT (9 a.m. EST).

Jim Hubbs of New Boston, Texas, said he heard police discussing over a

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COLUMBIA CREW

Gallery: Pilot McCool, Commander Husband, Mission Specialists Chawla, Clark and Brown, Payload Commander Anderson and Payload Specialist Ramon.



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police scanner "a smoking object going southeast" that disappeared in the Bowie County area near the Arkansas state line.

Amy Townsend, of Carthage, said she heard a loud boom that shook her house. She said there were two or three loud noises that lasted about a minute and that she saw a cloud of smoke outside her house.

Don Farmer of Lufkin, outside of Dallas, said he heard loud noises that lasted for 10 to 15 seconds. The noise sounded like dynamite exploding, and he thought it was an aircraft breaking the sound barrier.

Dozens of people, including several officers, reported seeing "a ball of fire," Bowie County Sheriff's office dispatcher Jodine Langford said. "They saw it go out and then break into pieces," she said. ([Witnesses' reports](#))

Officials said no tracking data were available.

The flag near the countdown clock at Kennedy Space Center was lowered to half-staff.

The Israeli Embassy in Washington has dispatched a small team to Florida to be with Col. Ilan Ramon's wife, four children and his parents, a spokesman for the Israeli embassy told CNN.

Ramon's family members had traveled from Israel to watch the planned return of the shuttle to the Kennedy Space Center Saturday morning.

Ramon's father was at a television station watching the unfolding coverage. Ramon, 48, took part in the 1981 bombing of the nuclear reactor in Iraq.

Former Senator John Glenn, who was the first American to orbit the Earth and returned to space at age 77, told The Associated Press that he had met his wife while he was training for his 1998 mission. He said he was watching the landing on television with his wife. ([Full story](#))

House Democratic leaders, who were holding a meeting in Pennsylvania, ended the session with a prayer for the seven astronauts.

"Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of those on board," House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi told The Associated Press. "Our thoughts and prayers are with the American people who place so much hope and who associate themselves with the courage and the bravery of those who venture into space."

Columbia is the oldest of NASA's shuttle fleet, first launched in 1981. It was on its 28th mission. The shuttle underwent an extensive, 17-month overhaul that began in September, 1999.



The crew members of STS-107 walked out January 16 for launch aboard Columbia's last mission.



Mission control officials in Houston lost contact with the shuttle Saturday morning.

It rejoined the shuttle fleet in February, 2001 and flew its first mission after the upgrades in March, 2002.

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