

An artist's concept of the Upper Atmosphere Research Satellite (UARS) satellite in space. The 6 1/2-ton satellite was deployed from space shuttle Discovery in 1991 and decommissioned in December 2005.

Pieces of NASA's 20-year-old Upper Atmosphere Research Satellite, or UARS, are believed to have landed on earth early Saturday morning ET, the U.S. space agency said, adding they were attempting to confirm exactly where.

"We expect that the debris has landed by now," NASA said on its Facebook page at about 1:30am ET. "We're just waiting to get confirmation of where from the U.S. Strategic Command that keeps an eye on space debris."

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The old research spacecraft was targeted to crash through the atmosphere sometime Friday night or early Saturday, putting Canada and Africa in the potential crosshairs, although most of the satellite should burn up during its re-entry. The United States wasn't entirely out of the woods; the possible strike zone skirted Washington state.

Until Friday, increased solar activity was causing the atmosphere to expand and the 35-foot, bus-size satellite to free fall more quickly. But late Friday morning, NASA said the sun was no longer the major factor in the rate of descent and that the satellite's position, shape or both had changed by the time it slipped down to a 100-mile [orbit](#).

"In the last 24 hours, something has happened to the spacecraft," said NASA orbital debris scientist Mark Matney.

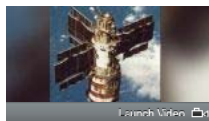
On Friday night, NASA said it expected the satellite to come crashing down between 11:45 p.m. and 12:45 a.m. EDT Saturday. It was going to be passing over the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans at that time, as well as Canada and Africa.

"The risk to public safety is very remote," NASA said in a statement.

Any surviving wreckage is expected to be limited to a 500-mile swath.

The Upper Atmosphere Research Satellite, or UARS, will be the biggest NASA spacecraft to crash back to Earth, uncontrolled, since the post-Apollo 75-ton Skylab space station and the more than 10-ton Pegasus 2 satellite, both in 1979. Russia's 135-ton Mir space station slammed through the atmosphere in 2001, but it was a controlled dive into the Pacific.

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