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This 2001 picture taken by the Galileo spacecraft shows asteroid 243 Ida. Russian scientists will soon meet in secret to work on a plan for saving Earth from a possible catastrophic collision with a giant asteroid in 26 years, the head of Russia's space agency said Wednesday.

Russia to Send Spacecraft to Attack Asteroid

Russia's space agency chief said Wednesday a spacecraft may be dispatched to knock a large asteroid off course and reduce the chances of earth impact.

Anatoly Perminov told Golos Rossii radio the space

agency would hold a meeting soon to assess a mission to Apophis. He said his agency might eventually invite NASA, the European Space Agency, the Chinese space agency and others to join the project.

When the 270-meter (885-

foot) asteroid was first discovered in 2004, astronomers estimated its chances of smashing into Earth in its first flyby, in 2029, at 1-in-37.

Further studies have ruled out the possibility of an impact in 2029, when the asteroid is

expected to come no closer than 18,300 miles (29,450 kilometers) from Earth's surface, but they indicated a small possibility of a hit on subsequent encounters.

NASA had put the chances that Apophis could hit Earth in

2036 as 1-in-45,000. In October, after researchers recalculated the asteroid's path, the agency changed its estimate to 1-in-250,000.

NASA said another close encounter in 2068 will involve a

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AMU Moves to Establish Investment Bank, Maghreb Economic Group

Meeting at the 29th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania have agreed that they intensify exchange of information with the aim to protect the security of the region.

The Council, which met in Tripoli on Tuesday, also to continue holding what they said useful consultation regarding all issues and to hold these kind of meeting before every Arab, regional or international gathering.

It also decided to set up a committee of experts to review a study sponsored by the African Development Bank that focuses on establishing a Maghreb Economic Group. The committee will especially work on defining the phases during which the group will be brought to reality.

The council expressed its satisfaction as to the agreement of all members regarding the free exchange of agriculture products and processed foods between members of the AMU.

It requested that the agreement should be ready for

signing during its next meeting.

The Council adopted new measures aiming at speeding up the establishment of the Maghreb Bank for Investment and Foreign Trade.

According to the Council's spokesman, the Maghreb ministers succeeded in solving the dispute over the bank's management set up. It was agreed that Algeria will serve as the chairman of the board of directors of the new bank for three years, while Tunisia will hold the position of general

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