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SOLO BALLOONIST SEES TOUGH DECISION AHEAD

By Marla Donato
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Friday is crunch day for Kevin Uliassi, who must decide if he has enough fuel and supplies to take on the Pacific Ocean in his quest to be the first solo balloonist to fly around the world.

"It all has to do with ballast--the weight--it's like a teeter-totter, (fewer) pounds means you go up," said Scott Lorenz, one of Uliassi's spokesmen at a command center in Homewood. "You wouldn't drive to northern Michigan without enough gas and cash in your pocket, and he has to decide if he has enough fuel, oxygen, battery power and take in account the forecasted weather."

If all goes according to plan, while most Chicagoans are sipping their Friday morning coffee, Uliassi will be halfway across Bangladesh and more than halfway around the world.

His current route calls for bypassing the Himalayas, going over Burma, across China, and then, if he decides to go on, the long Pacific Ocean stretch.

Uliassi, a Chicago Heights native, architect and mechanical engineer, took off from a quarry outside of Rockford on Feb. 22. He is keeping warm in an enclosed 60-degree capsule, and supplements his oxygen supply with a mask.

Although he was feeling a bit of balloon cabin fever in the capsule, he was reported to be in relatively good spirits Thursday night.

If he had to do it over, "he said he would make (the cabin) a foot bigger all the way around. He could use a little extra space. It's just big enough to accommodate him lying down," Lorenz said.

Rough weather has taken its toll during the trip.

While Uliassi was over the Nile River at 2 p.m. Wednesday, his balloon was jostled about, gaining and losing altitude as it was pelted with snow, sleet and hail by a surprise storm, Lorenz said.

Snow is not something most people expect while traveling across the Nile, but balloons travel at high altitudes. Uliassi on Thursday night was traveling at

"He was ascending and descending at a rate of 1,500
feet per minute" during the Nile storm, Lorenz said.

Other challenges included the temporary failure of
multiple electrical systems controlling the liquid
propane burner system.

He since has averaged about 100 miles an hour for
almost two days, Lorenz said Thursday night.

"One hundred miles an hour in a balloon is pretty
fast," Lorenz said.

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