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## Balloonist returns home to cheers

By Jonathan Lipman

The Associated Press

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CHICAGO (AP) -- Wearing a pair of sunglasses to hide a bump above his eye today, solo balloonist Kevin Uliassi greeted well-wishers three days after he was forced to abort his around-the-world attempt.

Uliassi, 36, arrived at O'Hare International Airport from Tokyo to the cheers of more than a dozen friends and family members, including his parents and his wife, Renee.

It was the first time they had seen him since he lifted off Feb. 22 from a quarry outside Rockford in an attempt to become the first solo balloonist to circle the globe.

Uliassi landed Friday in the southeast Asian country of Myanmar, also known as Burma, after experiencing equipment problems. He had traveled more than 13,000 miles.

A technical problem with the oxygen system he used to breathe prompted his decision to land in Myanmar, he said.

"There was nothing beyond that, only

PHOTOS



Kevin Uliassi (AP)

AUDIO

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mountains and jungle," he said. "At some point it just makes sense to terminate the flight."

The balloon hit an embankment when it landed, giving Uliassi a bump above his left eye.

"In 19 years of flying, I've never hurt myself," Uliassi said, "so I'm a little ashamed about this."

Uliassi, an engineer who lives in Scottsdale, Ariz., said he has not yet decided if he will try again.

The balloonist said he was glad in a way that he did not make it all the way around the world because his emergency landing let him meet people he otherwise would have just flown over.

"There were 400 villagers who adopted me, and a whole hospital full of doctors and nurses," he said. "If you complete the flight, that landing's not nearly as interesting. I'd just be landing in Rockford or Illinois and people would just be like, 'Oh, well great.' I wouldn't have any stories."

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