

SUN
OCT 26/92

ASTRONOMY

Comet feared on collision path with Earth

Reuter.

SYDNEY, Australia — A huge comet may collide with Earth in the year 2116, and could kill off most forms of life with an explosion more powerful than a million atom bombs, an expert on asteroids said Sunday.

The five-kilometre-wide ball of ice and rock is travelling so fast that, if it does collide straight into Earth, it could plunge the world into darkness, astronomer Duncan Steel of the Anglo-Australian Observatory told the Second Australian Space Development Conference in Sydney.

"It would create an impact force of 20-million megatons, or about 1.6 million times the force of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima," Steel said.

The International Astronomical Union, the world astronomy authority, noted the comet's discovery Oct. 15 and for the first time since keeping records of such finds, could not rule out a collision with Earth, Steel said.

Named Comet Smith-Tuttle, it was first sighted in 1862 and rediscovered in September this year.

Astronomers have since been watching the comet, travelling at 60 kilometres a second, and early calculation of its path around the sun led to the union's announcement.

"We need to track it for five or six years to be sure. If it's going to hit it will be on Aug. 14, 2116, because that's when its path intersects the Earth's," Steel said.

There are hundreds of thousands of asteroids — spinning pieces of space rock — circling the sun that stay safely between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter.

About 3,000 wayward asteroids bigger than about a kilometre wide are believed to have orbits that could intersect Earth's.