Earth's scouts miss close encounter with asteroid

WASHINGTON, Friday: An asteroid the size of a soccer field whizzed by Earth at a distance much nearer than the Moon, the big gest such space rock in decades to get this close, scientists said on Thursday.

Asteroid 2002MN was not detected until Monday, three days after its closest approach on June 14, when it got within 120,000km of Earth and was travelling at a speed of some 10km per second, astronomers said.

It is now several million kilometres away, according to Brian Marsden, of the' Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics' Minor Planet Centre, which tracks asteroids. "It's the largest [asteroid] we've seen at that distance in the last several decades," he said in a telephone interview.

The last time any asteroid came this close was in 1994, according to the Near Earth Object Information Centre in Britain.

The big rock, with a diameter of roughly 50 metres to 120 metres, would not have caused global catastrophe if it had struck Earth. That would take an asteroid of several kilometres diameter. However, if it had hit Earth it had the potential to cause as much local devastation as a 1908 hit in Tunguska, Siberia, which flattened some 2000 square km of forest.

Asteroid 2002MN was first spotted bv the Lincoln Near Earth Asteroid Research program, based in Socorro, New Mexico. "It's a good thing it missed the Earth, because we never saw it coming," Steve Maran, of the American Astronomical Society, said in a telephone interview.

LINEAR is part of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's initiative to find 90 percent of all near-Earth objects, including asteroids, that measure lkm or more in diameter by 2008.

An asteroid the size of 2002MN might hit Earth about once every hundred years or so, and the planet might not have seen the last of this one, Marsden said.

"There is a slim chance it could hit in 2061," he said, putting that chance at about one in 100,000.

Asteroid 2002MN would be observable by some telescopes but it was getting fainter as it moved away, Marsden said.