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Star may have asteroid belt -- and planets

By Deborah Zabarenko

PASADENA, California (Reuters) - In a possible cosmic replay of our own solar system's early times, astronomers have said they have evidence of an asteroid belt around a nearby star, suggesting that planets might be there too.

The suspected asteroid belt around zeta Leporis, a star twice the mass of the sun in the constellation Lepus (the Hare), is wider than the one in Earth's solar system and looks at this point more like a swath of swirling dust than the raw material or remains of planet formation.

Still, conditions may be ripe for planets to form there, if they have not already, researchers said at a news conference at the American Astronomical Society meeting in Pasadena on Monday.

"It might be the first detection of a dust disk around a star with a size comparable to the asteroid belt in our own solar system," said Christine Chen, a graduate student at the

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University of California-Los Angeles.

"We hope to learn from it something about the environment in which terrestrial planets form," Chen said, referring to rocky ones like Earth. "This is in contrast to the Jovian planets that have been discovered around other stars."

In the last five years, dozens of Jovian planets, so called because they are as massive and gassy as the giant Jupiter in our own system, have been detected orbiting other stars. These big planets have been spotted not through direct observation, but by a characteristic wobble in the stars they orbit, caused by the planets' gravitational pull.

Chen and her adviser at UCLA, Michael Jura, tackled the question from a different angle, and found an area where terrestrial planets might form.

DUST COULD HOLD PLANETS

Zeta Leporis was a good candidate for observation because of its proximity to Earth; at about 60 light-years, it is truly a close neighbour in cosmic terms. A light-year is about six trillion miles, the distance light travels in a year.

Zeta Leporis is a good age for this kind of observation, the scientists said, being between 50 million and 400 million years old, about the same age the sun was when Earth was forming. The sun is now about 4.5 billion years old.

And the putative asteroid belt is located in what scientists call the terrestrial planet zone, the area closer to the star that is home to planets like Earth, rather than in the far-out region where big planets like Jupiter and eccentric planets like Pluto reside.

Earth and other terrestrial planets in our system probably formed when smaller objects smashed into each other and stuck together; Chen said that might be happening now around zeta Leporis, or might have already occurred.

Mark Sykes, of the Steward Observatory at the University of Arizona, suggested that in addition to possible rocky planets, a bit Jupiter-like planet might also be possible. Big Jovian planets tend to pull belts of dust and debris into elliptical orbits, he said, and this is a possibility here.

None of these theories is confirmed, and it will be difficult to determine whether any terrestrial planets lurk in this system, Jura said.

"Terrestrial planets are very hard (to detect) because there's not very much mass there," Jura said. "It would be hard to directly image a planet immersed in the dust because the

surface brightness from the dust would make it hard to see."

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration has long-range plans to search for terrestrial planets, but nothing immediate is in the works, the scientists said.



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