Detection of charged aerosols during the BEXUS18 stratospheric flight: main results and open questions

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Keywords: atmospheric ions; charged particles; atmospheric electricity; stratospheric balloon

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Electrified aerosols have been previously detected in the troposphere and mesosphere, not only during disturbed weather but also in fair weather atmosphere. The detection of electric charges and discharges of volcanic ashes (Gilbert et al., 1991; Mather and Harrison, 2006; James et al., 2008; Harrison et al., 2010) and of Saharan dust layers (Ulanowski et al., 2007; Nicoll et al., 2011) are only a few examples of charged aerosols in the troposphere. On the contrary, charged particles have been seldom detected in the stratosphere (Renard et al., 2013).

The “A5-Unibo” experiment by the University of Bologna has been developed to the aim of studying vertical profiles of atmospheric ions and particles all along the flight of the BEXUS18 stratospheric flight. The experiment was flown from the Esrange Space Center from Kiruna (Sweden) on 10th October 2014 within the REXUS/BEXUS programme.

The experiment (Figure 1) collected vertical profiles of: 1) atmospheric parameters such as temperature, relative humidity, and pressure; 2) particles size distribution with an innovative aerosol counter (LOAC “Light Optical Particle Counter”); 3) ion (both positive and negative) densities (Air Ion Counter, AlphaLab Inc.).

Figure 1. A5-Unibo experiment onboard Bexus 18 stratospheric balloon.

The preliminary results obtained (Figure 2) indicate good correlations between particle concentrations and ions above the tropopause level and in the stratosphere, and suggest in particular the presence of layers of electrified aerosols in the middle stratosphere similar to Renard et al. (2013).

Even though model calculations are now being used to quantify the electrification of the aerosols with a stratospheric aerosol-ion model (Rawal et al., 2013; Renard et al., 2013), the need for further measurements to be conducted on stratospheric balloons clearly emerges. In fact, the presence of layers of electrified aerosols could have significant implications for sprite formation.

Figure 2. Vertical profiles of integrated concentrations for all the aerosols greater than 200 nm and of negative and positive ion densities recorded during the balloon ascent (a sliding smoothing is applied to suppress small length-scale fluctuations).

Acknowledgements

This work was designed and developed within the collaboration of the Flight Mechanics Laboratory and the Department of Chemistry of the University of Bologna as main supporters. Every team member of the A5-Unibo experiment had a different task and was essential for the success of the experiment. We also acknowledge: a) institutional supporters: DLR, Rymdstyrelsen, SSC, ESA, EuroLaunch, ZARM; b) private companies and associations: AlphaLab Inc., Boxer, Iacobucci HF Aerospace, Icos, CNA Forlì-Cesena, Dogcam, Gruppo SDS, Società Italiana di Medicina Generale, Plastica Panaro, Bustaplast, Bellini Tiziana, Mascherpa.