Russia says to bear brunt of space missions

Editor's Note: I remember hearing about this when I visited the Johnson Space Center (in Houston) a while back. Is this a consequence of embracing the unreliable space shuttle?

(Reuters) - Russia expects to extend the life of the International Space Station beyond 2015, although Moscow must bear the brunt of flights after the United States retires its shuttles, officials said on Sunday.

Space agency heads will meet in March 2010, probably in Japan, to discuss the future of the International Space Station (ISS), Alexei Krasnov, head of manned programs at Russian space agency Roscosmos, told a news conference.

"The main question to be raised is whether to extend the life of the ISS beyond 2015. I believe the issue will be approved," Krasnov said at Mission Control outside of Moscow.

He was speaking after a Russian-American crew returned to Earth after a space odyssey lasting more than half a year. They were accompanied by Canadian circus billionaire Guy Laliberte, who spent about two weeks in space.

Russia's partners in the ISS are U.S. space agency NASA, the European Space Agency and the Japanese and Canadian space agencies.

NASA plans six more missions by its fleet of aging space shuttles after the construction of the $100 billion ISS is completed. Afterwards, the shuttles will be retired, next year or early in 2011.

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Roscosmos head Anatoly Perminov was quoted by RIA news agency on September 25 as saying it had learned NASA could extend the deadline to retire the shuttles.

Should it proceed, however, the retirement of U.S. shuttles would increase the burden on Russia for manning the ISS, now in orbit 360 km (225 miles) above Earth, said Vitaly Lopota, general director of Russian spacecraft builder RKK Energia.

Lopota told the news conference Russia had doubled the number of manned space flights to four this year and planned to send six cargo ships per year to the space station, also more than usual.

"We work economically, we live economically and we maintain the station in an economical way," Lopota said.

NASA's future strategy is under review [ID:nN08291139] with a focus on possible flights to Mars. It is also encouraging a private space taxi project to the ISS. [ID:nN23400481]

A new rocket and capsule to transport astronauts to the ISS is also being developed but will not be operational until about 2015. Until then, NASA will rely on Roscosmos and must pay $50 million per seat for flights to the ISS by Soyuz capsules.

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