

International space trio lands in Kazakhstan

Robin Paxton, Reuters

Three astronauts inside a Russian Soyuz capsule parachuted safely back to Earth Tuesday after nearly six months on the International Space Station (ISS), the first landing since NASA retired its space shuttles this summer.

U.S. astronaut Mike Fossum, Japan's Satoshi Furukawa and Russian cosmonaut Sergei Volkov landed at 0226 GMT, shortly before sunrise on the snowbound steppe of central Kazakhstan, NASA TV showed.

"The landing was great. Everything's good," said Volkov, flashing a thumbs-up signal after he was extracted from a Soyuz TMA-02 capsule blackened by the extreme temperatures on re-entry to the atmosphere.

The closure of NASA's shuttle program means Russian spaceships are the only way to ferry goods and crews to and from the \$100-billion ISS, which is shared by 16 nations, until commercial firms develop the ability to transport crews.

Russia hopes the textbook landing will help to restore confidence in its space program after the August crash of an unmanned Russian cargo flight suspended manned space missions.

The returning crew have been replaced in orbit by NASA's Daniel Burbank and Russians Anton Shkaplerov and Anatoly Ivanishin, whose successful launch last week allayed fears that the station would be left empty for the first time in a decade.

But the troubles have left the space station with half the usual handover time. The new crew had only six days with the outgoing astronauts to get up to speed on the quirks of life in space and the station's operations.

NASA said the Soyuz capsule had landed on its side, not unusual in windy conditions, about 90 km (55 miles) north of the town of Arkalyk. Temperatures at the landing site were 15 degrees Celsius below zero.

The three-man crew had spent 167 days in space and their return to Earth took about three-and-a-half hours.

Volkov, huddled in a thermal blanket, is a second-generation cosmonaut and was following in the footsteps of his father, NASA said. It called him: "a rising star in the cosmonaut corps."

Fossum, second to emerge from the capsule, called his loved ones by satellite phone from the landing site. Furukawa, a 47-year-old professional surgeon, was last to emerge. An assistant mopped sweat from his brow.

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After initial medical checks in an inflatable tent on site, the returning crew will be taken by helicopter to the city of Kostanai in northern Kazakhstan.

The ISS will regain full, six-person occupancy with the late December launch of U.S. astronauts Don Pettit, cosmonaut Oleg Kononenko and Andre Kuipers of the European Space Agency.

(Additional reporting by Dmitry Solovyov; Editing by Myra MacDonald)

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