Soyuz spacecraft lands safely in Kazakhstan

Associated Press

ALMATY, Kazakhstan (AP) -- A Soyuz space capsule carrying a three-man multinational crew touched down safely Sunday on the southern steppes of Kazakhstan, bringing an end to their 193-day mission to the International Space Station.

Around a dozen recovery helicopters zeroed into the vast uncultivated land mass, where NASA astronaut Donald Pettit, Russia's Oleg Kononenko and Dutchman Andre Kuipers landed in the Russian-made capsule.

Russian space officials quickly surrounded the craft, which performed a perfect upright textbook landing, and erected ladders to begin the process of pulling out the astronauts.

The voyage from the space station started 3 -1/2 hours earlier, when it undocked and began a slow, gentle drift away. It made a perfect landing in the still and summery weather at 2:14 pm local time (08:17 GMT), right on schedule.

Commenting on the landing, NASA TV reporter Rob Navias described it as "a bullseye."

Kononenko was the first to be extracted from the descent module. He looked pale and tired, but medical staff announced him healthy. Pettit, second out of the module, was heard to say: "It's good to be home."

The three men were hoisted into recliners and posed for photos for a number of minutes before being carried into a tent for further checks.

Writing on his NASA blog on the eve of his departure from the space station, Petit write: "I only hope that my small efforts here, perhaps adding one grain of sand to the beach of knowledge, will help enable a generation of people in the future to call space `home.'"

Petit and his colleagues were part of the team that handled the arrival to the space station last month of the privately owned SpaceX Dragon capsule. That became the first private delivery to the International Space Station.

The retirement of the U.S. shuttle fleet has left Russia's venerable Soyuz spacecraft as the only means to deliver crews to the orbiting laboratory.

Russians Gennady Padalka and Sergei Revin and U.S. astronaut Joseph Acaba are expected to remain onboard the orbiting space station for a further three months.

They will be joined later this month by NASA astronaut Suni Williams, Russia's Yury Malenchenko and Japanese astronaut Aki Hoshide, who are set to take off on a Soyuz spaceship from the Baikonur cosmodrome in southern Kazakhstan.

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