

U.S.-Russian space crew lands safely in Kazakhstan

Nastassia Astrasheuskaya, Reuters

(Reuters) - A Russian Soyuz capsule landed on the Kazakh steppe on Monday, delivering a trio of astronauts from a four-month stint on the International Space Station.

The capsule, carrying U.S. astronaut Joseph Acaba and Russian cosmonauts Gennady Padalka and Sergei Revin, parachuted through a blue sky and touched down in a cloud of dust as its soft landing engines ignited at 8:53 local time (0253 GMT).

"Bull's eye landing," a NASA TV commentator said as the capsule lay on its side in the Kazakh steppe circled overhead by approaching search-and-recovery helicopters.

Veteran mission commander Padalka, who has logged 711 days in orbit to make him the world's fourth most experienced astronaut, was the first out of the cramped descent capsule.

"I feel great," said Padalka, wrapped in a blue blanket, sipping hot tea and smiling, enjoying the balmy steppe air under the early morning sunlight as medical personnel wiped sweat from his brow.

"This was my fourth flight, and so it is nothing of the extraordinary already," he said, looking relaxed.

During his stay at the orbital station, Padalka conducted a six-hour spacewalk on August 20 to relocate a crane, launch a small science satellite and install micrometeoroid shields on the space station's Zvezda command module.

He and fellow crew members Acaba and Revin were carried over to autograph the Soyuz, scorched black by re-entry, to be displayed in a Russian provincial museum.

The crew returned after spending 123 days in orbit aboard the International Space Station, a \$100 billion research complex involving 15 countries and orbiting 240 miles above Earth.

The mission was shorter than the usual six months after launch delays in order to ready a new spaceship to replace the initial Soyuz craft, which was cracked during pressure tests.

Moscow hopes Monday's smooth landing will help to ease concerns over relying solely on [Russia](#) [1] to service the ISS following a string of recent mishaps in its

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

space program.

"Everything is to cheer today," Russian space agency chief Vladimir Popovkin told reporters at Mission Control in Moscow.

"Padalka, Revin and Acaba are feeling well, and they will all go home today."

Three other International Space Station crew members - veteran Russian cosmonaut Yuri Malenchenko, NASA astronaut Sunita Williams and Japanese astronaut Akihiko Hoshide - remain in orbit.

They are scheduled to be joined by another trio - Kevin Ford, Oleg Novitsky and Yevgeny Tarelkin - due to blast off from the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan next month.

That mission was scheduled to launch on October 15 but will be delayed by about a week due to a technical glitch with equipment aboard the Soyuz, Popovkin said.

"We've had a worry over one of the devices. We decided to change it, test it again and so the launch has been put off by one week," Popovkin said.

The Soviet Union put the first satellite and the first man in space, but Russia's space program has suffered a series of humiliating set-backs in recent months that industry veterans blame on a decade of crimped budgets and a brain drain.

While none of the mishaps have threatened crews, they have raised worries over Russia's reliability, cost billions in satellite losses and dashed Moscow's dreams to end a more than two-decade absence from deep-space exploration.

Since the retirement of the U.S. space shuttles last year, the United States is dependent on Russia to fly astronauts at a costs to the nation of \$60 million per person.

(Writing by Alissa de Carbonnel and Robin Paxton, Additional reporting by Dmitry Solovyov in Almaty; Editing by Eric Walsh)

Source URL (retrieved on 11/24/2014 - 9:06am):

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