Soyuz with crew of three lands in Kazakhstan

Robin Paxton, Reuters

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

The Soyuz TMA-05M capsule, carrying Japanese astronaut Akihiko Hoshide, Russian cosmonaut Yuri Malenchenko and U.S. astronaut Sunita Williams, parachuted through dark, cloudy skies and touched down at 7:56 a.m. local time (0156 GMT).

A round of applause greeted the landing at Russian mission control near Moscow, footage from NASA TV showed. A screen inside the building showed the message: "We have landing!"

The capsule blazed a red plasma trail across the dark sky after re-entering the Earth's atmosphere. It landed on its side on the snow-covered steppe 52 miles northeast of the town of Arkalyk in northern Kazakhstan.

The astronauts were extracted quickly from the capsule and wrapped in blue thermal blankets. All three smiled and appeared relaxed as they chatted with the search-and-recovery team, NASA TV footage showed.

"Fresh air - very good!" Williams said, in Russian. The landing, after a three-and-a-half-hour descent from the orbital outpost, was the first pre-dawn touchdown since 2006.

The Expedition 33 crew had spent 125 days aboard the International Space Station, a $100 billion research complex involving 15 countries and orbiting 250 miles above Earth.

The crew conducted a number of experiments, including tests on radiation levels at the space station and research into the effects of melting glaciers and seasonal changes on Earth's ecosystems, NASA said in a statement.

They also managed several visits to the space station by international and commercial spacecraft and conducted several space walks to maintain the station.

A three-man crew remains aboard the space station. When NASA's Kevin Ford and rookie cosmonauts Oleg Novitsky and Yevgeny Tarelkin - both on their first space mission - docked on October 25, they brought with them Japanese fish for a variety of experiments.

They are scheduled to be joined by another trio - Canadian Chris Hadfield, U.S. astronaut Tom Marshburn and cosmonaut Roman Romanenko - who are due to blast off from the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan on December 19.

Monday's smooth landing will help to ease concerns over Russia's space programme following a string of recent mishaps.

The Soviet Union put the first satellite and the first man in space, but Moscow's space programme has suffered a series of humiliating setbacks 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 of dollars in satellite losses and dashed Moscow's dreams of ending its 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 [1] to fly astronauts at a cost to the nation of $60 million per person. (Reporting by Robin Paxton; editing by Philip Barbara and Christopher Wilson)

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