

Soyuz Capsule Lands in Kazakh Steppe With 3 Aboard

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Skvortsov holding a custom-painted nesting doll after landing Saturday. **Maxim Shipenkov**

ALMATY, Kazakhstan — A Soyuz capsule carrying three astronauts who lived six months on the international space station touched down safely, but one day late, Saturday morning in the cloudy, central steppes of Kazakhstan.

The homecoming of cosmonauts Alexander Skvortsov and Mikhail Korniyenko and U.S. astronaut Tracy Caldwell-Dyson had been delayed after technical glitches hindered the undocking of the spacecraft.

NASA spokesman Rob Navias said in a web streamed report on the landing that the Soyuz craft landed vertically at its precise planned landing spot at 11:23 a.m.

"That was almost a bull's-eye landing," Navias said.

A hover of 12 Russian recovery helicopters took flight ahead of the landing Saturday morning above an area southeast of the remote central Kazakh town Arkalyk to intercept the capsule.

Recovery workers arrived quickly at the landing spot and erected a platform around the slightly tilted capsule.

Skvortsov beamed with joy and held his fist aloft as the recovery team carefully lifted him out of the Soyuz.

After being hoisted out of the craft, the astronauts were immediately placed into reclining chairs to help them recover from the change in gravitational pull after spending 176 days in space.

Russian space officials and health workers then crowded around a smiling Skvortsov and handed him an apple, as is tradition.

Caldwell-Dyson, who looked weary but joyous, spoke with colleagues by satellite phone after being lowered into her chair and wrapped in a blanket.

By contrast with the previous day's attempt to depart the space station, undocking from the international space station was executed flawlessly and exactly on schedule.

The three astronauts remaining aboard the space station — Americans Doug Wheelock and Shannon Walker, and Russian Fyodor Yurchikhin — pumped their fists with joy as they watched a report on the landing via a direct feed.

Cosmonauts Alexander Kaleri and Oleg Skripochka, along with NASA astronaut Scott Kelly, will join them after blasting off from the Baikonur launch facility in Kazakhstan on Oct. 8.

Undocking on Friday had been thwarted by signaling errors in the onboard computer system and a malfunction with the opening hooks and latches on the space station side of the capsule.

After the failed undocking attempt, one of the cosmonauts on board, flight engineer Yurchikhin, inspected the space station docking mechanism holding the Soyuz in place and discovered a loose piece of gear mechanism with two teeth broken off.

The crew installed a series of electrical jumper cables to bypass what is believed to be a failed part. Once that was completed, the cosmonauts performed a test, and the hooks and latches opened properly, NASA said.

Minor, but recurring, glitches with the Soyuz will create unease as reliance on the Russian craft increases over the next few years with one or two launches left for U.S. space shuttles before the fleet is retired.

The space shuttle Discovery is set to lift off Nov. 1 for the international space station. Endeavour will follow in February to wrap up 30 years of shuttle flight.

That will leave NASA without its own means to send astronauts into space for the first time in half a century.

The Federal Space Agency plans to send two paying civilians to the international space station after 2013, Bloomberg reported Saturday, citing RIA-Novosti.

The tourists will be accompanied by a professional Russian space commander, it said.

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