

Perminov Says Spaceship Fixed After Incident

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A Russian spacecraft that suffered rough handling during transportation to the launch pad has been repaired and is safe to carry the next crew to the international space station, the nation's space chief said Tuesday.

Federal Space Agency head Anatoly Perminov said the Soyuz TMA-20 was sent back to the manufacturer after the October incident. A thorough check revealed no damage to the ship's systems, he said, but some components were replaced to make it absolutely safe.

"They replaced all equipment that might have suffered some damage, even though they performed fine during checks," Perminov told reporters. "After that, they checked it again and then sent the ship to the Baikonur cosmodrome."

Soyuz spacecraft are assembled by state-controlled RKK Energia at a factory in Korolyov, just outside Moscow, then transported by rail to Baikonur — 2,000 kilometers southeast in Kazakhstan.

The Soyuz TMA-20 is set to blast off Dec. 15 to ferry a crew of Russian Dmitry Kondratyev, U.S. astronaut Catherine Coleman and the European Space Agency's Paolo Nespoli to the orbiting outpost.

Perminov also met with the crew members over tea.

Coleman, a veteran of two U.S. space shuttle missions, said after the meeting that she was fully confident that the Russian engineers had made the ship safe to fly.

"It's absolutely safe enough," she said. "I have worked here in Russia for a long time, and I trust them."

The international space station marked its 10th anniversary on Nov. 20. The mammoth space lab consists of 10 modules built by the United States, Russia, Canada, Japan and the 18-state European Space Agency.

Soyuz spacecraft will be the only link to the station after the planned retirement of the U.S. shuttle fleet next year. Coleman said that shouldn't create any problems.

"When I look around at [Russia's space agency], at Energia, at all the different organizations here in Russia, the people who actually build hardware, put it together and the same thing in Europe, in Japan, in the United States ... the people are the same," she said. "And they all have the same dream, and they all care about the crew who goes to space, and they want them to come home, and I trust that."

Coleman said her 10-year-old son, Jamey, has closely followed her training and feels excited about her mission.

"He has a small toy tiger, and I take this tiger with me all over the world," she said. "And I take pictures of what I'm working on with the tiger, and I think it makes him think: 'What's the tiger doing today? I wonder if that was difficult, I wonder what the tiger needed to know.'"

During the meeting with Perminov, Coleman said the difference in weight between her and Nespoli, who is very tall, made her son ask whether he might squeeze in.

"He might follow you later," Perminov said.

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