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Space Losses Blamed on ‘Carelessness’

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Prosecutors blamed human error for two failed space launches in August, including the loss of a supply ship to the International Space Station.

"It has been established that both incidents happened because of the carelessness of people working in state space industry enterprises," the Prosecutor General's Office said in a statement Tuesday. The officials responsible should be held accountable, it said.

The preliminary cause of the Aug. 24 crash was a fuel malfunction in the rocket's third-stage engine powering the Progress craft, the Moscow-based agency said Aug. 29.

The nation's space industry suffered a blow last year when a Proton-M rocket failed to deliver three navigation satellites into orbit for Glonass, a rival to the U.S. Global Positioning System. President Dmitry Medvedev subsequently fired the head of the space agency.

Russia lost its most powerful telecommunications satellite, Express-AM4, in August after a faulty launch by another Proton-M rocket, setting back the country's efforts to promote wider availability of communications services.

Russia provides the only way for U.S. astronauts to travel to the station following a decision to end the almost 30-year-old space shuttle program this year, with the last flight having taken place in June. Russia uses the same Soyuz rockets to launch manned and cargo vessels.

The orbiting space station had to reduce its crew to three astronauts because safety checks are still being conducted before the resumption of manned flights to it. NASA warned in late August that the space station would have to be evacuated if Soyuz booster rockets remain grounded beyond mid-November.

The Federal Space Agency and NASA have agreed tentatively to restart manned launches on Nov. 14. Three crew members returned from the station on Sept. 16.

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