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Soyuz Ship Sends 3 to Orbiting Station

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A Soyuz spacecraft safely delivered a Russian, an American and a Dutchman to the International Space Station on Friday, restoring the permanent crew to six members for the first time since September.

But just as concerns over the reliability of the Soyuz have eased, a different version of the Soyuz rocket failed Friday during an unmanned launch. It was the latest in a string of spectacular launch failures that have raised questions about the state of Russia's space industry.

The craft carrying mission commander Oleg Kononenko, NASA's Don Pettit and European Space Agency astronaut Andre Kuipers had traveled through space for two days after blasting off from Baikonur, the Russian-operated cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. The ship docked at the orbiting station on Friday.

About 2 1/2 hours later, the three new crew members floated through an opened hatch to join NASA's Dan Burbank and Russians Anton Shkaplerov and Anatoly Ivanishin, who had arrived on the station in November.

"I can't think of a prettier picture than seeing all six back on board the space station," NASA's William Gerstenmaier told the assembled crew during a video linkup with Russian Mission Control outside Moscow.

Families of crew members, who had joined space officials to watch the docking, also sent their greetings, with Kuipers' young child singing him a song in Dutch.

The six crew members will work together on the International Space Station until mid-March.

The failed launch of an unmanned Progress cargo ship in August had raised doubts about future missions to the station, because the Soyuz rocket that crashed used the same upper stage as the booster rockets carrying Soyuz ships to orbit.

The next manned launch was delayed until Russian space officials could determine the cause of the Progress failure, and it went off without a hitch in November. The crew on that mission overlapped for eight days with the three crew members remaining on the station, who then returned to Earth later that month.

However, on Friday, a newer version of the Soyuz failed to put a Meridian communications satellite into orbit when launched from Russia's Plesetsk cosmodrome. Space agency head Vladimir Popovkin said the cause was engine failure.

"What happened today was a highly unpleasant situation," Popovkin was quoted by state news agencies as saying. "It confirms that the [aerospace] industry is in crisis and its weakest link is engine-building."

The failures Friday and during the Progress launch in August both took place during the third stage. The Soyuz-2.1b that crashed Friday, however, has a different third-stage engine, Itar-Tass reported.

Friday's failed launch was the sixth in the past year.

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