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Kazakhstan Mulls Ending Russia's Cosmodrome Lease

By The Moscow Times

December 10, 2012

ALMATY, Kazakhstan — The head of Kazakhstan's space agency said Monday that Russia's lease of a launch facility there, the only site worldwide being used to get astronauts to the International Space Station, may be suspended.

Kazcosmos head Talgat Musabayev told parliament proposals are being considered to bring the Baikonur Cosmodrome under Kazakhstan's jurisdiction, Interfax-Kazakhstan reported.

Under an arrangement set to expire in 2050, Russia pays Kazakhstan $115 million annually for use of the Soviet-built cosmodrome. Russia spends $160 million per year operating the facility.

It is likely that Russia will continue to use Baikonur, since its own in-country launch facilities remain underdeveloped, but the possible absence of a lease will create an air of uncertainty over how the facility will be administered in the future.

A three-man crew from the United States, Russia and Canada is due to leave for the space station next week onboard a Russian-built Soyuz spacecraft.

"The rent agreement on Baikonur adopted in 1994 has run its course. The head of state held talks with [Russian President] Vladimir Putin and has tasked us with formulating a new, all-encompassing agreement on Baikonur," Musabayev said.

Musabayev said that if the lease agreement is rescinded, it could be done over several stages. He suggested that the lease for the launch facility for the Zenit vehicles used to carry satellites into orbit could be first to be canceled.

It is unclear what is motivating Kazakhstan's decision to push for a revision of arrangements on Baikonur, but the country has been pushing for an increased role in the space industry.

Observers worry that the transfer of Baikonur to Kazakhstan could lead to an exodus of specialists from the town, worsening the shortage of expertise in Russia's space program.

Of the more than 70,000 people living in the town of Baikonur, about 40 percent are Russian citizens.

Although the town still formally lies in Kazakhstan's territory, it is rented out to Russia. Security is provided by both Russian and Kazakh law enforcement, and both countries' currencies are used, although the Russian ruble is generally preferred.

Conditions in the town, in a remote spot on the arid southern steppes, have steadily worsened over the past few years. Abandoned apartment buildings have become a common sight, and crime is on the rise. Meanwhile, the quality of basic household utilities has degraded notably.

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