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Investigators Open Case Into Failed Proton Rocket Launch

By The Moscow Times

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Investigators have started a criminal inquiry into the failed launch earlier this week of a Proton-M space rocket that has sparked renewed doubts about the efficiency of the Russian space industry.

The Investigative Committee has launched a probe into possible violation of safety rules during preparations for the launch.

"Investigators are examining the relevant documentation and questioning officials who are in charge of the preparation and the launch of the rocket," committee spokesman Vladimir Markin told reporters.

"A number of forensic experiments may be ordered to establish the exact cause of the accident," he said.

The Proton-M rocket was carrying three Glonass navigation satellites when it exploded shortly after launch early Tuesday from the Baikonur space center in Kazakhstan.

The exploding rocket left behind a cloud of toxic heptyl, amyl and kerosene fuels, although experts believe it will not have a significant impact on the local ecology.

Kazakh authorities, however, have set up a government commission led by the nation's environment minister to explore the accident's aftermath. Rumors of mass deaths of livestock in the areas adjacent to the space center were dismissed by Kazakhstan officials on Thursday.

No one has been accused of causing the accident at this stage, but breaking launch safety rules leading to a crash carries a penalty of up to three years in prison according to Russian law.

Russia has indefinitely suspended all scheduled Proton launches from Baikonur, including those for a U.S. Sirius FM6 telecoms satellite on Aug. 14 and a Russian Kosmos military satellite on Sept. 5.

The Tuesday accident is the second unsuccessful launch of a Proton-M rocket carrying satellites for Russia's flagship Glonass positioning system in the last three years.

In December 2010, a Proton-M veered off course and crashed in the Pacific Ocean, after engineers overloaded the rocket with fuel, said International Launch Services, the U.S. firm that markets commercial Proton launches.

Another Proton-M mission was unsuccessful in December 2010 after a failure in the rocket's upper-stage Briz engine. A control system glitch caused the loss of a Proton-M in August 2011, while complications with a Briz engine led to the loss of another Proton mission a year later.

The partial failure of a Briz booster on a Proton rocket in December last year caused a payload to be put into an incorrect orbit, which was later corrected, according to Russia's Federal Space Agency.

Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, who oversees the defense and aerospace industries and has been ordered to oversee the investigation, said after the accident that "harsh decisions" must be made, as Russia's rocket and space industry "cannot continue to exist in its current form."

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