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Sea Launch Denies Plans to Shelve Launch Platform

By Matthew Bodner

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Sea Launch has ordered several Zenit-3SL rockets, which are in various states of completion, from east Ukrainian defense industry giant Yuzhmash.

The Sea Launch international joint venture is not planning to mothball its California-based maritime launch platform for two years due to the crisis in Ukraine, as has been suggested by a flurry of recent Russian media reports, a senior company official said Thursday.

Peter Stier, deputy head of sales and marketing for Sea Launch, told The Moscow Times that the company, which sends payloads into space from a floating platform in the Pacific Ocean and is co-owned by Russian, Ukrainian and U.S. companies, is continuing to buy rockets from Ukraine and to promote its services to the international launch market.

Stier did say that Sea Launch is exploring contingency plans should they ever need to suspend operations, though the company does not expect the situation to arise. One possibility would be to minimize "the running time of the vessel's engines to realize significant diesel fuel cost

savings while maintaining the readiness, certifications and capability of the system to return to service quickly," he said.

"This is something Sea Launch has done before during periods in which we had gaps in our manifest and demonstrates the unique flexibility we retain as the world's only launch provider who owns its own commercial launch pad and controls its own range," Stier said.

On Wednesday, Yurii Alexeyev, head of the Ukrainian Space Agency, also denied media reports that Sea Launch's operations had been jeopardized by a potential split between the Russian and Ukrainian space and defense industries, and said that production of the Zenit rocket for Sea Launch was continuing on schedule.

"Ukraine has supplied, is supplying, and is prepared to [continue] supplying all that is needed for Sea Launch. There is no problem for Sea Launch," Alexeyev said, Interfax-Ukraine reported Tuesday.

Sea Launch has ordered several Zenit-3SL rockets, which are in various states of completion, from east Ukrainian defense industry giant Yuzhmash. So far there is no indication that production has been threatened by the political crisis in Eastern Europe.

In May the Ukrainian Space Agency said the output of the country's space industry had increased 21.5 percent in the first quarter of 2014.

About 70 percent of the components Yuzhmash uses to build Zenit rockets are imported from Russia's Energia Rocket and Space Corporation. Both companies supply staff to operate the Odyssey launch platform and Zenit rocket.

Yuzhmash is one of Ukraine's most important industrial assets, producing thousands of parts used in the construction of military hardware, 70 percent of which were exported to Russia. Last week, however, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko banned military cooperation with Russia, ostensibly halting these exports.

But Vitaly Yarema, who was Ukraine's first deputy prime minister before being appointed prosecutor general last week, has said that Kiev will make exceptions for equipment that has both civilian and military uses. The Zenit rocket certainly fits the bill, since it has only ever launched civilian satellites into orbit.

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