

ISS astronauts land safely in Kazakhstan

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Canadian astronaut Robert Thirsk rests in a vehicle after he returned to earth from the International Space Station (ISS) aboard a Soyuz TMA-15 space capsule that landed around 88 kms (55 miles) north of the town of Arkalyk, in northern Kazakhstan.

A space capsule carrying a Belgian, a Canadian and a Russian landed safely in the steppes of Kazakhstan on Tuesday after the trio spent half a year on the International Space Station (ISS).

Belgian Frank De Winne, Canadian Robert Thirsk and Russian Roman Romanenko landed at 10:16 am (0716 GMT) around 88 kilometres (55 miles) north of Arkalyk, a town in central Kazakhstan, a spokeswoman for Russian mission control said.

Television pictures showed the astronauts being pulled from the Soyuz TMA-15 capsule and put onto stretchers by Russian cosmonaut-retrieval crews.

De Winne -- the first European to command the ISS -- waved to the television camera as he was loaded onto a stretcher.

Astronauts have trouble walking when they return to Earth after long stays in zero gravity.

Freezing weather and low clouds forced the cosmonaut-retrieval crews to head to the landing scene in all-terrain vehicles rather than the usual helicopters, space officials said.

"They feel good.... I congratulate everyone. The main thing is they are all alive and well," Anatoly Perminov, head of the Russian federal space agency, told a televised news conference after the landing.

Steve MacLean, head of the Canadian space agency, called the trio's space voyage an "amazing adventure."

"On behalf of the Canadian space agency and on behalf of Canada I want to congratulate the crew," MacLean told reporters.

"This was a mission of international partnership and I think history will show this is how we will work in the future," he added.

De Winne, Thirsk and Romanenko had been in space more than six months, arriving at the ISS on May 29.

Romanenko, 38, was making his first flight into space and following in the footsteps of his father, Yury Romanenko, a veteran Soviet cosmonaut who made a number of spaceflights in the 1970s and 1980s.

The three had originally been scheduled to be transported to the Star City cosmonaut training centre outside Moscow on Tuesday to be reunited with their families and to continue re-adjusting to gravity.

However the bad weather delayed their departure until at least Wednesday, meaning they would spend the night in Kazakhstan, officials said.

The ISS will be manned by just two people, US astronaut Jeff Williams and Russian cosmonaut Maxim Surayev, until late December, when three more crew members are set to arrive.

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