

Astronauts take call from admiring President Obama

February 18 2010, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



In this image obtained via Twitter astronaut Soichi Noguchi aboard the International Space Station posted this image showing the Sahara Desert, the first view out of the cupola's windows on the observation deck of the the Tranquility module station early Wednesday morning Feb. 17, 2010. (AP Photo/NASA via Twitter)

(AP) -- With their construction work finished, the 11 astronauts aboard the shuttle-station complex accepted congratulations Wednesday from President Barack Obama, who assured them of his "unwavering" commitment to NASA.

The VIP call came just hours after the two crews threw open the shutters on the International Space Station's big new bay window. They were still reveling in "this new grand view that we have of the world below us," as the station's skipper, Jeffrey Williams put it.

The seven-windowed lookout is part of a space station addition named Tranquility that was put on last week.

"I just wanted to let you guys know how proud we are of all of you," Obama said. "Everybody here back home is excited about this bay on the world that you guys are opening up. And Stephen Colbert at least is excited about his treadmill."

Last year, the TV comedian campaigned to have the new room named after himself and even won the online vote. But [NASA](#) couldn't bring itself to have a module named Colbert and offered up the latest in space treadmills instead. The name Tranquility comes from the dusty lunar sea where [Neil Armstrong](#) and [Buzz Aldrin](#) landed more than 40 years ago.

Surrounded by schoolchildren with an engineering bent, Obama noted "the amazing work" being done on the space station by multiple nations. It is "a testimony to why continued [space exploration](#) is so important and is part of the reason why my commitment to NASA is unwavering," he said.

Obama did not mention his recent decision to cancel NASA's back-to-the-moon program, Constellation - a controversial verdict within the aerospace community. He also offered no hints as to where astronauts might venture next, following the space station era.

Four more shuttle flights remain. After that, the space station will have to rely on visiting capsules and supply ships from other countries. The orbiting outpost, at least, won a reprieve under the Obama budget plan; its working lifetime was extended to 2020.

The middle school students asked the astronauts about the possibility of creating artificial gravity in space and the range of emotions experienced up there. They also wanted to know what landmarks were visible from

the astronauts' 220-mile-high perch and whether weather could be observed, like the Washington blizzard. The answers: no artificial gravity yet, joy and a sense of wonder, the Golden Gate Bridge and New York City skyscrapers, and storm aftermaths and cloud formations.

Obama noted that climate monitoring was going to be big on everyone's radar from now on.

Following the 20-minute call, the astronauts resumed work inside Tranquility and the attached lookout, together totaling more than \$400 million in European contributions.

The [astronauts](#) needed to move a water-recycling system into Tranquility, as well as an oxygen generator and toilet. NASA gave the shuttle crew an extra day at the orbiting outpost to get all this done. The observation deck was supposed to get a robotic work station early Thursday, but the work was put off until after the shuttle's departure because of structural interference.

Endeavour will undock from the space station Friday and return to Earth on Sunday, two weeks after blasting off.

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Citation: Astronauts take call from admiring President Obama (2010, February 18) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-02-astronauts-obama.html>

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