Storms may delay space shuttle Endeavour landing

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NASA image taken from the International Space Station shows the US Space Shuttle Endeavour as it travels over the Pacific Ocean. Astronauts aboard Endeavour hope to end their two-week mission to the International Space Station Sunday, but stormy weather is threatening to delay their return to Earth.

Astronauts aboard the US shuttle Endeavour hope to end their two-week mission to the International Space Station Sunday, but stormy weather is threatening to delay their return to Earth.

Endeavour's six crew are scheduled to touchdown at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida at 10:16 pm (0316 GMT), but the weather outlook included rain showers and overcast conditions near the coastal runway.

Similar conditions were forecast at the shuttle's backup runway at Edwards Air Force Base in California, complicating efforts to end a flight that equipped the International Space Station with Tranquility -- a habitable module -- and a new observation deck offering stunning views of space.

The Endeavour crew had additional landing opportunities late Sunday and Monday in Florida and California. Conditions were forecast to worsen at Kennedy on Monday, but improve at Edwards.

The spacecraft carries enough supplies to remain in orbit until Tuesday, if necessary. NASA also has the option of diverting Endeavour's astronauts to a landing strip in White Sands, New Mexico.

"There are a lot of options we can look at," LeRoy Cain, chairman of NASA's mission management team, told reporters.

"The likelihood of all three sites being severely 'no go' is pretty unlikely."

Endeavour commander George Zamka, pilot Terry Virts and astronauts Steve Robinson, Bob Behnken, Kay Hire and Nicholas Patrick awoke late Saturday and spent much of the night testing the shuttle's flight control and communications systems for landing.

After departing the space station late Friday, the shuttle crew examined Endeavour's heat shielding with cameras and lasers fitted to an inspection boom held by the shuttle's robotic arm.

An assessment of the imagery by Mission Control was still under way late Saturday.

Other than indications of a few minor debris impacts on the cockpit

windows, there were no obvious signs of damage to the shielding that protects the spacecraft from the heat buildup that accompanies the spacecraft's high speed descent to Earth.

"Endeavour's performance has been just outstanding," said Cain.

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