

# Russian, US astronauts blast off to ISS

June 15 2010

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Russian cosmonauts Fyodor Yurchikhin (R) and US astronaut Doug Wheelock (L) speak at the Kazakhstan's Russian-leased Baikonur cosmodrome. A Russian cosmonaut and two American astronauts blasted off Wednesday for a restaffing mission to the International Space Station, Russian television showed in a live broadcast.

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The Soyuz-FG rocket lifted off on schedule from Russia's Baikonur cosmodrome in the Kazakh steppe at 01:35 am (2135 GMT Tuesday) carrying Russian cosmonaut Fyodor Yurchikhin and US astronauts Shannon Walker and Douglas Wheelock.

In a pre-flight press conference, the US astronauts admitted to some apprehension about the mission, but voiced their readiness and gratitude.

"I am very happy to be going and maybe just a little afraid," Walker said as quoted by the RIA Novosti news agency, with Wheelock echoing the sentiment.

Yurchikhin's young daughter Elena told her father in a public goodbye that she wanted to follow in his footsteps as a cosmonaut, complaining though that "Mom won't let me" fly to space just yet.

"I am with your mother on this 100 percent," Yurchikhin answered.

Russia's Vesti-24 television news channel showed the team sitting calmly in the cockpit as the rocket fired off into the night sky.

The Soyuz is due to dock on Friday with the ISS, where the team is expected to conduct several scientific tests, unload three Progress shuttles, and assemble an experimental satellite, space officials quoted by RIA Novosti said.

The astronauts would also maintain an Internet blog and an email mailbox to supply information on the station and space as a whole.

The mission is the last launch by a Soyuz rocket to the ISS before the US space shuttle program is mothballed later this year, leaving the burden of travel to the ISS entirely on Russian spacecraft.

Despite losing the shuttles Columbia and Challenger in a pair of disasters the programme was considered a resounding success and soon took on the lion's share of responsibility for transporting US astronauts.

A successor to the space shuttle is scheduled to take off no earlier than 2015.

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