

Russian capsule carrying 3 docks at space station

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A Russian Soyuz TMA-19 rocket with US astronauts Doug Wheelock, Shannon Walker and Russian cosmonaut Fyodor Yurchikhin blasts off from Kazakhstan's Russian-leased Baikonur cosmodrome on June 16. A Russian space ship carrying a Russian cosmonaut and two US astronauts on Friday docked successfully with the International Space Station, mission control officials said.

(AP) -- The International Space Station received three new residents with Thursday's arrival of a Russian capsule, doubling the size of its female crew to an all-time high.

NASA, meanwhile, was keeping close watch on three pieces of space junk that could come uncomfortably close to the orbiting outpost this weekend. They are old Russian and Chinese satellite and rocket parts.

The Soyuz spacecraft - launched two days earlier from Kazakhstan -

docked at the orbiting outpost as the vessels zoomed 220 miles above the Atlantic near Argentina.

It's NASA's method of getting U.S. astronauts to and from the space station for lengthy missions, and will become the only means of getting people there, period, once the shuttles stop flying late this year or next. Private companies like Space Exploration Technologies, which successfully launched a test rocket into orbit from Cape Canaveral two weeks ago, hope to pick up the slack.

Russian space officials said the docking went exactly as planned and demonstrated the reliability of the Soyuz.

The early evening arrival of the latest Soyuz means there are now two women living full time at the space station for the first time ever. No previous space station ever had two female residents at the same time, so the docking marked a historic first.

Shannon Walker, a physicist from Houston, joins Tracy Caldwell Dyson, a California-born chemist on board the space station since April. Walker took Amelia Earhart's watch into orbit. Four men also are on board now: three Russians and one American. Each will stay for six months and return via a Soyuz.

Wednesday, by coincidence, marked the 47th anniversary of the launch of the first spacewoman, Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova.

And Friday is the 27th anniversary of the launch of America's first woman in space, Sally Ride.

Four women were at the space station in April, but only for 1 1/2 weeks. Three of them were brief shuttle visitors.

NASA wants to re-evaluate the orbit of the space station Friday - taking into account any changes as a result of the Soyuz docking - before deciding whether to move the outpost away from three pieces of worrisome space junk.

Mission managers decided there was no need to dodge a fourth piece of junk, which was expected to pass the station at a safe distance early Friday. That, too, was a chunk of an old Russian satellite.

Arriving with Walker was American Douglas Wheelock and Russian Fyodor Yurchikhin, both of whom visited the space station before. Walker is making her first spaceflight ever; she is married to NASA astronaut Andrew Thomas.

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