

# Soyuz crew ready to blast off into space

December 15 2010, By PETER LEONARD , Associated Press

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U.S. astronaut Cady Coleman, left, Russian cosmonaut Dmitry Kondratiev, center, and Italian astronaut Paolo Nespoli crew members of the mission to the International Space Station, ISS, pose through the safety glass after a news conference at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Tuesday, Dec. 14, 2010. Start of the new Soyuz mission is scheduled on Wednesday, December 15. (AP Photo/Dmitry Lovetsky)

(AP) -- Three astronauts put aside any last-minute jitters about their Soyuz spacecraft amid final preparations for Thursday's launch to the International Space Station.

Russia's Dmitry Kondratyev, NASA astronaut Catherine Coleman and the European Space Agency's Paolo Nespoli of Italy received final clearance for the launch from the Baikonur cosmodrome on the steppes of Kazakhstan onboard a Russian-made Soyuz TMA-20. The spacecraft is scheduled to take off shortly after midnight Wednesday (1909 GMT Wednesday, 2:09 p.m. EST).

Kondratyev shrugged off worries about the re-entry module of their Soyuz craft, which was hastily replaced earlier this month after it was damaged during unloading at Baikonur.

"All the procedures needed to check the integrity of the ship have been completed, and all those have shown positive results," Kondratyev said at the final news conference before the launch. "We have absolutely no doubts about the reliability of the craft and that the flight will take place as planned."

The three will spend five months at the space station, which has a full schedule for 2011, with the arrival of several cargo craft delivered by the U.S., Russian, European and Japanese space agencies.

The astronauts will also be at the space station in April to mark the 50th anniversary of Yuri Gagarin's achievement as the first human flight into space.

"As the crew that is onboard the International Space Station on this very special day, we won't be walking on the pages of history, we'll be floating," Coleman told reporters from behind a protective glass. The crew is kept in strict isolation in the days ahead of the launch to avoid exposure to infection.

International space operations will enter a new phase next year after the U.S. shuttle fleet is mothballed. Two more shuttle missions are planned, after which the Soyuz will be the only vehicle available to transport crews to the orbiting laboratory.

Russia profited handsomely from that monopolist position when it signed contracts for carrying NASA astronauts to the space station up to the end of 2014. A round-trip ticket to the space station in 2011 and 2012 will cost NASA as much as \$51 million, up from the current \$26

million. The price will jump to \$56 million in 2013 and 2014.

The White House wants NASA focused on next-generation rockets and spacecraft that could carry astronauts to asteroids and Mars, and hopes to rely on private business to develop craft capable of ferrying cargo and crew to the space station. Last week, Space Exploration Technologies Corp. of Hawthorne, California, conducted a second test launch of its Dragon capsule, and safely guided it back to Earth for the first time.

The company plans to send the Dragon to the space station next summer and then build its piloted version to deliver crews there.

Russia's Federal Space Agency chief Anatoly Perminov welcomed the Dragon's success, saying Wednesday it would alleviate the burden of Russia's space program. "This will be very good for Russia, because by having a reserve vehicle, we will free up our own resources," he said.

Reflecting the increasingly international flavor of space missions, the three astronauts flying Thursday all come from different countries - a development hailed by Nespoli.

"If we want to keep going on with this exploration, going back to the moon or Mars ... we need to put together all the resources that are around the world," he said.

Despite all the diplomatic bonhomie, national differences still persist when it comes to culinary tastes.

Nespoli, a native of the northern Italian region of Lombardy, has been churning out a steady stream of Twitter messages, including one jokingly complaining about a recent breakfast in Baikonur of over-boiled pasta and chicken.

"As Italians, we have a very strict way of eating, and that breakfast broke every single rule that we have," Nespoli told reporters.

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Citation: Soyuz crew ready to blast off into space (2010, December 15) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-12-soyuz-crew-ready-space-station.html>

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