

Russia slams 'childish' space agency errors

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A Proton-M rocket, carrying the Russian Glonass-M satellites, blasts off from the Russian-leased Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan on December 5, 2010. Russian space agency Roskosmos has committed "childish" errors and failed to build enough spacecraft, the government said in an unprecedented rebuke to the Russian equivalent of NASA.

Russian space agency Roskosmos has committed "childish" errors and failed to build enough spacecraft, the government said Monday in an unprecedented rebuke to the Russian equivalent of NASA.

Russia's powerful Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov issued the dressing down at a meeting with Roskosmos's leadership after two satellite launches ended in partial or complete failure in the last three months.

In December three Glonass navigation satellites ended up plummeting into the Pacific off the US state of Hawaii after launch due to what

officials concluded was a simple fuel miscalculation.

And this month Russia put its new Geo-IK-2 military satellite into the wrong orbit, rendering it useless for defence purposes.

"The recent failure with the Glonass satellites is a characteristic example," Ivanov said. "I won't go into details, this was a mistake, but a childish one and a mistake that had serious consequences."

"Any repeat of the mistakes of the recent past -- and I am referring to the loss of the Glonass satellites and the partial Geo-IK failure -- is of course unacceptable," he warned, quoted by Russian news agencies.

The failures have been particularly painful as Russia gears up to celebrate in April the 50th anniversary of Yuri Gagarin becoming the first man in space, still seen as one of the most important achievements in its history.

First Deputy Defence Minister Vladimir Popovkin bluntly declared last week "that the Geo-IK-2 spacecraft is lost for the Defence Ministry. It will not be used for its intended purpose."

Ivanov said that the failed launch of the Glonass satellites alone had cost Russia 2.5 billion rubles (\$86 million, 63 million euros).

The head of Roskosmos, Anatoly Perminov, said the cause of the Glonass failure had been insufficient control over new technology.

Meanwhile, Ivanov said that Roskosmos had failed to meet its goals in the production of spacecraft and rockets, saying that in 2010 it produced only five out of the 11 spacecraft it was supposed to make.

He said that six spacecraft for civilian purposes had failed to launch in

2010 due to the delays.

"And I am not even talking about the systematic delays to launch dates which were a consequence of the spacecraft not being ready," he added.

Ivanov also criticised Roskosmos for failing to properly insure the Glonass satellites, after the agency conceded last year its policy did not cover the full cost.

"Where is the insurance?" he was quoted as saying. "Everything needs to be insured according to real market prices using real insurance mechanisms," he added.

Russia on Saturday successfully launched a Glonass satellite from its northern Plesetsk launchpad, restoring some pride after the catastrophic December launch.

The Russian space programme suffered from a sharp drop in funding after the fall of the Soviet Union, and Roskosmos has sent several paying space tourists to the International Space Station (ISS) to help make ends meet.

Yet the onus on Russia is set to grow when NASA takes the US shuttle out of service this year, leaving the Russian Soyuz rockets and spacecraft as the sole delivery systems for taking humans to the ISS.

Ivanov said Russia remained the world leader in the number of space launches, with 31 last year, while the United States performed 16. Russia currently has 114 satellites in space, he said.

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