

Space junk safely passes space station; crew OK (Update 2)

April 5 2011, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



In this Tuesday, Dec. 14, 2010 file picture, U.S. astronaut Catherine Coleman, left, Russian cosmonaut Dmitry Kondratyev, center, and Italian astronaut Paolo Nespoli crew members of the mission to the International Space Station, ISS, pose through a window after a news conference at the Baikonur, Kazakhstan cosmodrome. A small piece of space junk is drifting dangerously close to the International Space Station. NASA has ordered the three station astronauts to seek shelter late Tuesday afternoon, April 5, 2011 in the Russian Soyuz capsule that is docked at the orbiting complex. A NASA spokesman says there's no time to steer the station out of harm's way. (AP Photo/Dmitry Lovetsky)

(AP) -- After monitoring a small piece of space junk for 11 hours, NASA determined it posed no danger Tuesday to the International Space Station and its three residents.

Commander Dmitry Kondratyev and his crew were prepared to climb

into their attached Russian Soyuz capsule for shelter. But an hour before the closest approach, Mission Control radioed the good news. Additional tracking showed the 6-inch piece of debris would remain a safe distance from the orbiting complex.

"That means we don't get to jump out tonight?" joked Italian astronaut Paolo Nespoli. He said he had been looking forward to getting some pizza. "OK, next time," he said.

The debris is from a Chinese satellite that was deliberately destroyed in 2007 as part of a weapons test. Initial estimates put it passing less than three miles from the space station late Thursday afternoon. Mission Control ordered Kondratyev, Nespoli and American Catherine Coleman to prepare to get in the Soyuz; there was not enough time to steer the outpost away from the junk.

But as the afternoon wore on, the threat level went from red to green, and the Soyuz precaution was no longer needed. It ended up coming no closer than 3.3 miles.

Just last Friday, the space station had to move out of the way of an orbiting remnant from a two-satellite collision in 2009.

Debris is an increasingly serious problem in orbit, because of colliding and destroyed spacecraft. At 5 miles a second, damage can be severe, even from something several inches big. Decompression, in fact, is at the top of any spacefarers' danger list.

More than 12,500 pieces of debris are orbiting Earth - and those are the ones big enough to track.

The orbit of the Chinese space junk is extremely erratic, and there's quite a bit of atmospheric drag on it, said NASA spokesman Josh Byerly.

That's why additional tracking was needed before a final decision was made.

The three station residents arrived at the station in the Soyuz capsule last December. The spacecraft serves as a lifeboat in case of an emergency. It will be used at the end of their six-month mission to deliver the crew back to Earth in May.

A fresh three-person crew is en route to the 220-mile-high outpost after rocketing away from Kazakhstan. That Soyuz is due to arrive Wednesday evening.

The last time a station crew took refuge in a Soyuz was in 2009.

©2010 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: Space junk safely passes space station; crew OK (Update 2) (2011, April 5) retrieved 6 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-04-space-junk-threatening-station-residents.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.