Russia sends multinational crew to ISS

December 21 2011

The International Space Station (ISS) crew member Dutch astronaut Andre Kuipers (centre) waves as he walks before boarding the Soyuz TMA-03M spacecraft in the Russian-leased Baikonur cosmodrome. Russia sent a multinational crew of three astronauts to the International Space Station on a Soyuz rocket from its Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.

Russia on Wednesday sent a multinational crew of three astronauts to the International Space Station on a Soyuz rocket from its Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.

Russian cosmonaut Oleg Kononenko, US NASA astronaut Don Pettit and Dutch astronaut Andre Kuipers blasted off aboard a Soyuz TMA-03M spacecraft at 1316 GMT in a spectacular night-time launch from the Kazakh steppe.

The launch, which filled the otherwise pitch-black steppe with blazing

light, appeared to go smoothly and mission control said that the Soyuz went into orbit as planned 10 minutes after lift-off.

Unusually, Kononenko did not bring any talisman to hang in the cockpit to indicate the arrival of weightlessness, telling reporters ahead of mission that there were other means of measuring gravity.

Their mission will bring the crew of the ISS back up to its full complement of six after the timetable for the launches was reshuffled following the loss of a Russian Progress supply ship bound for the station in August.

When they dock on Friday at 1520 GMT the trio will join Dan Burbank of NASA and Russian cosmonauts Anton Shkaplerov and Anatoly Ivanishin -- who have been on the ISS since mid-November -- and prepare to spend Christmas together.

The crew on their way to the ISS is unusually experienced with all having previous experience of space flight.

Kononenko is a veteran of one ISS mission after a 199-day mission in 2008 while Kuipers also had a short stint on the orbiting laboratory in 2004. Petit had a 161-day mission in 2002-2003 and also flew on the shuttle in 2008.

Following the retirement of the US shuttle in July, Russia is currently the only nation capable of transporting humans to the space station.

But its image as a reliable partner was severely tarnished with the loss of the Progress supply ship, which crashed into Siberia shortly after launch and caused a complete rejig of the launch schedule.

This capped a disastrous year for the Russian space agency which also

saw the loss of three navigation satellites, an advanced military satellite and a telecommunications satellite due to faulty launches.

Russia has also acknowledged the almost certain loss of its Phobos-Grunt probe for Mars's largest moon, which was launched on November 9 but has failed to head out of Earth's orbit on its course to the Red Planet.

The probe is expected to fall back to Earth in January but Russian space officials have emphasised it should not pose a threat to anyone on the ground.

The recent problems were a major disappointment for Russia in the year marking half a century since Yuri Gagarin made man's first voyage into space from Baikonur.

The Soyuz rocket design first flew in the late 1960s and has a proud safety record, with Russia boasting that its simplicity has allowed it to outlive the shuttle.

Whereas NASA endured the fatal loss of the Challenger and Columbia shuttles in 1986 and 2003, Moscow has not suffered a fatality in space since the crew of Soyuz-11 died in 1971 in their capsule when returning to Earth.