

Kazakhstan mulls ending Russia's cosmodrome lease (Update)

December 10 2012, by Peter Leonard

The head of Kazakhstan's space agency said Monday that Russia's lease of a launch facility in the Central Asian nation, the only site worldwide currently being used to get astronauts to the International Space Station, may be suspended.

Interfax-Kazakhstan news agency cited Kazcosmos head Talgat Musabayev as telling parliament that proposals are being considered to bring the Baikonur facility under Kazakhstan's jurisdiction.

Russia pays Kazakhstan \$115 million annually for use of the Soviet-built Baikonur cosmodrome under an arrangement set to expire in 2050. Russia spends \$160 million per year operating the facility.

It is likely that Russia will continue to use Baikonur, since its own in-country launch facilities remain underdeveloped, but the possible absence of a lease will create an air of uncertainty over how the facility will be administered in future. A three-man crew from the United States, Russia and Canada is due to leave for the space station next week onboard a Russian-built Soyuz spacecraft.

"The rent agreement on Baikonur adopted in 1994 has run its course. The head of state held talks with (Russian President) Vladimir Putin and has tasked us with formulating a new, all-encompassing agreement on Baikonur," Interfax-Kazakhstan cited Musabayev as saying.

Musabayev said that if the lease agreement is rescinded, it could be done

over several stages, Interfax reported. He suggested the lease for the launch facility for the Zenit vehicles used to carry satellites into orbit could be first to be cancelled.

It is unclear what is motivating Kazakhstan's decision to push for a revision of arrangements on Baikonur, but it is known that it has been pushing for an increased role in the space industry.

Observers worry that the transfer of Baikonur to Kazakhstan could lead to an exodus of specialists from the town, worsening the shortage of expertise in Russia's space program.

Out of the more than 70,000 people currently living in the town of Baikonur, around four-tenths are Russian citizens, while most of the remaining residents are subjects of Kazakhstan.

Although the town still formally lies within Kazakhstan's territory, it is rented out to Russia. Security is provided by both Russian and Kazakh law enforcement services, and both national currencies are used, although the Russian ruble is generally preferred.

Conditions in the town, which lies in a remote spot in Kazakhstan's arid southern steppes, have steadily worsened over the past few years. Abandoned apartment buildings have become a common sight and criminal activity is on the rise, while the quality of basic household utilities has degraded notably.

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