First Dane in space begins long trip to repositioned ISS

September 2 2015

The first Dane in space accompanied by 26 custom-made figurines from Danish toymaker Lego blasted off from Kazakhstan on Wednesday as part of a three-man team on an unusually long two-day mission to the International Space Station.

The trip by the Soyuz spacecraft is scheduled to last two days instead of the usual fast-track six hours since the ISS has raised its orbit to avoid space debris.

The trio launched on schedule at 0437 GMT from the same launchpad in Kazakhstan used by Yuri Gagarin on his historic entry into the cosmos in 1961.

"The crew is doing well, everything is in order onboard," relayed mission control.

Veteran cosmonaut Sergei Volkov of the Russian space agency Roscosmos is leading a team that also includes first-time flyers Aidyn Aimbetov from Kazakhstan's space agency and Denmark's Andreas Mogensen of the European Space Agency.

They are expected to dock with the ISS on Friday at 07:42 GMT.

Most recent launches including the latest in July have used a six-hour approach to the ISS, orbiting the Earth four times, which is less gruelling for astronauts.

The two-day approach, orbiting Earth 34 times, was the norm until 2013.

Russia's space agency acting chief Alexander Ivanov, quoted by Interfax news agency, said the two-day journey was chosen as "the safest and most reliable."

The change was made because the ISS in July had to significantly raise its orbit to avoid flying space debris.

The ISS on Monday also manoeuvred to raise its orbit again by one kilometre to ensure that the next batch of departing astronauts land in the correct location on Earth on September 12, mission control said.

The latest take-off marked the 500th launch from the Gagarin launchpad named after the Soviet space pioneer.

Volkov will stay on at the ISS for 188 days, while both Aimbetov and Mogensen will return to Earth next week after 10 days.

Mogensen is the first Dane to enter space. "It's a great honour for me to represent Denmark as an astronaut," he said last month.

Aimbetov, who replaced British singer Sarah Brightman after she pulled out of the mission in June, is the third astronaut from Kazakhstan, which hosts Russia's cosmodrome.

Brightman, a 55-year-old soprano known for her roles in Andrew Lloyd Webber musicals, pulled out of her plan to fly as a space tourist on the flight for a fee of $52 million, citing family reasons.

Lego and horse milk

Mogensen, 38, is flying with 26 custom-made Lego models of astronauts

provided especially for the mission by the world-famous Danish toy manufacturer, as well as the writing of Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard.

Aimbetov, 43, took dried horse milk and several other national staples from the Central Asian country into space with him as well as a toy from his daughter, who said she hoped he would encounter alien life.

At a press conference ahead of the flight on Tuesday, Kazakhstan's Deputy Prime Minister Berdibek Saparbaev noted that Volkov's own cosmonaut father Alexander accompanied the first-ever Kazakh in space, Toktar Aubakirov, on a 1991 mission.

"Now you have continued this line by becoming the commander of the crew in which our Aidyn Aimbetov is flying."

The launch from Baikonur is the first since July 23, when Russian cosmonaut Oleg Kononenko and US astronaut Kjell Lindgren and Japan's Kimiya Yui blasted off into space.

Prior to that, Russia had put all space travel on hold after the failure of the unmanned Progress freighter in late April. The doomed ship lost contact with Earth and burned up in the atmosphere, forcing a group of astronauts to spend an extra month on the ISS.

In May, another Russian spacecraft, a Proton-M rocket carrying a Mexican satellite, malfunctioned and crashed in Siberia soon after its launch.

Space travel is one of the few facets of international cooperation between Russia and the West that has remained unaffected by the Ukraine crisis.