Three astronauts safely aboard International Space Station (Update)

December 3 2018, by Dmitry Lovetsky

The Soyuz-FG rocket booster with Soyuz MS-11 space ship carrying a new crew to the International Space Station, ISS, blasts off at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. The Russian rocket carries U.S. astronaut Anne McClain, Russian cosmonaut Oleg Kononenko and CSA astronaut David Saint Jacques. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky)

Three astronauts who were launched into space aboard a Russian Soyuz spacecraft Monday entered the International Space Station nearly eight

hours later, a relief to relatives and scientists months after a rocket failure aborted another mission.

The hatch of the capsule carrying NASA astronaut Anne McClain, David Saint-Jacques of the Canadian Space Agency and Oleg Kononenko of Russian space agency Roscosmos was opened while the station was flying over the southern coast of Yemen.

The three were greeted upon arrival Monday by the station's current crew members, who had waited outside the hatch after the astronauts' capsule docked and underwent safety checks.

Their Soyuz MS-11 spacecraft launched from the Russian-leased Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan on Monday at 5:31 p.m. (1131 GMT; 6:31 a.m. EST) then entered a designated orbit just under nine minutes later. The spacecraft made four orbits over six hours as it chased down the space station for the docking.

The astronauts were the first sent to be sent to the space station since a crewed Soyuz launch was aborted in October after a booster rocket failed to separate properly, crippling the rocket. The families of the crew, other astronauts and space officials from several nations breathed a sigh of relief after observing the flawless launch.

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NASA and Roscosmos said all onboard systems operated normally and the astronauts felt fine during the six-hour trip the space station. After two hours waiting in their capsule to confirm their ship was firmly docked to the station, they exited the capsule to join three astronauts already aboard the orbiting outpost at 1:37 a.m. (1940 GMT; 2:40 p.m. EST.)

The station's current crew of NASA's Serena Aunon-Chancellor, Russian Sergei Prokopyev and German Alexander Gerst were waiting to greet the newcomers. They are scheduled to return to Earth on Dec. 20.

McClain, Saint-Jacques and Kononenko will spend more than six months at the space station doing research and experiments in biology, Earth science, physical sciences and technology.

U.S. astronaut Anne McClain, centre, Russian cosmonaut Oleg Kononenko and CSA astronaut David Saint Jacques, top, crew members of the mission to the International Space Station, ISS, wave as they board to the rocket prior to the launch of Soyuz-FG rocket at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. (AP Photo/Shamil Zhumatov, Pool)

A Soyuz-FG rocket carrying NASA astronaut Nick Hague and Roscosmos' Alexei Ovchinin failed two minutes into its flight on Oct. 11, activating an automatic rescue system that sent their capsule into a

steep ride back to Earth. They managed to emerge safely despite the harrowing ordeal.

A Russian investigation attributed the failure to a sensor that was damaged during the rocket's final assembly.

NASA announced Monday that Hague and Ovchinin will now launch to the space station on Feb. 28, along with NASA astronaut Christina Hammock Koch.

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The Soyuz accident in October was the first aborted crew launch for the Russian space program since 1983, when two Soviet cosmonauts safely jettisoned after a launch pad explosion.

Russian space officials took measures to prevent the repeat of such a rocket failure. Since the October mishap, four successful unmanned Soyuz satellite launches have been conducted to clear the path for the crew's launch on Monday.

After Monday's successful launch, NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine tweeted his thanks to his Russian counterpart Dmitry Rogozin and to NASA and Roscosmos space teams "for their dedication to making this launch a success."

The Soyuz spacecraft is currently the only vehicle that can ferry crews to the space station, but Russia stands to lose that monopoly in the coming years with the arrival of SpaceX's Dragon and Boeing's Starliner crew capsules.

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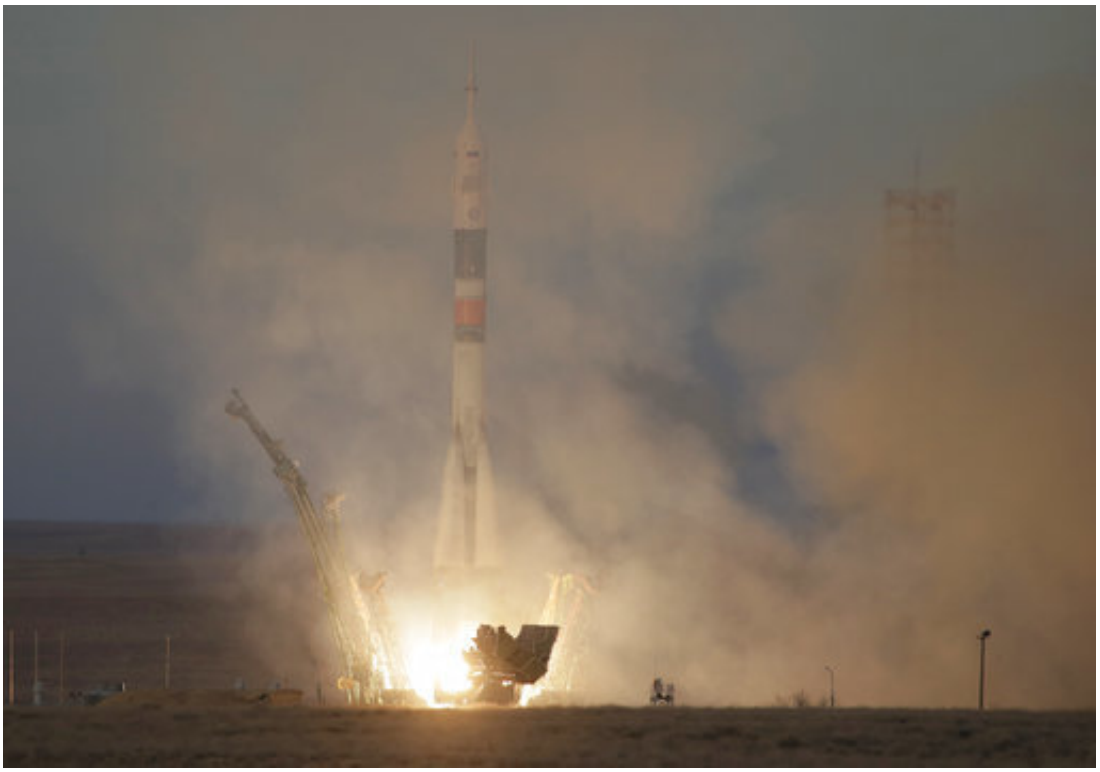

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U.S. astronaut Anne McClain, left, Russian cosmonaut Oleg Kononenko, centre, and CSA astronaut David Saint Jacques, members of the main crew of the expedition to the International Space Station (ISS), report to members of the State Committee prior to the launch of Soyuz MS-11 space ship at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky, Pool)

U.S. astronaut Anne McClain, member of the main crew of the expedition to the International Space Station (ISS), speaks with her relatives through a safety glass prior to the launch of Soyuz MS-11 space ship at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky, Pool)

Russian Space Agency experts help CSA astronaut David Saint Jacques, member of the main crew of the expedition to the International Space Station (ISS), during the inspection of his space suit prior the launch of Soyuz MS-11 space ship at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky)

CSA astronaut David Saint Jacques, member of the main crew to the International Space Station (ISS), interacts with his children from a bus prior to the launch of Soyuz-FG rocket at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky, Pool)

U.S. astronaut Anne McClain, member of the main crew of the expedition to the International Space Station (ISS), gestures prior to the launch of Soyuz MS-11 space ship at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky)

CSA astronaut David Saint Jacques, member of the main crew of the expedition to the International Space Station (ISS), during an inspection of his space suit prior to the launch of Soyuz MS-11 space ship at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky)

CSA astronaut David Saint Jacques, member of the main crew to the International Space Station (ISS), interacts with his children from a bus prior to the launch of Soyuz-FG rocket at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky, Pool)

CSA astronaut David Saint Jacques, member of the main crew of the expedition to the International Space Station (ISS), speaks with his relatives through a safety glass prior to the launch of Soyuz MS-11 space ship at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky, Pool)

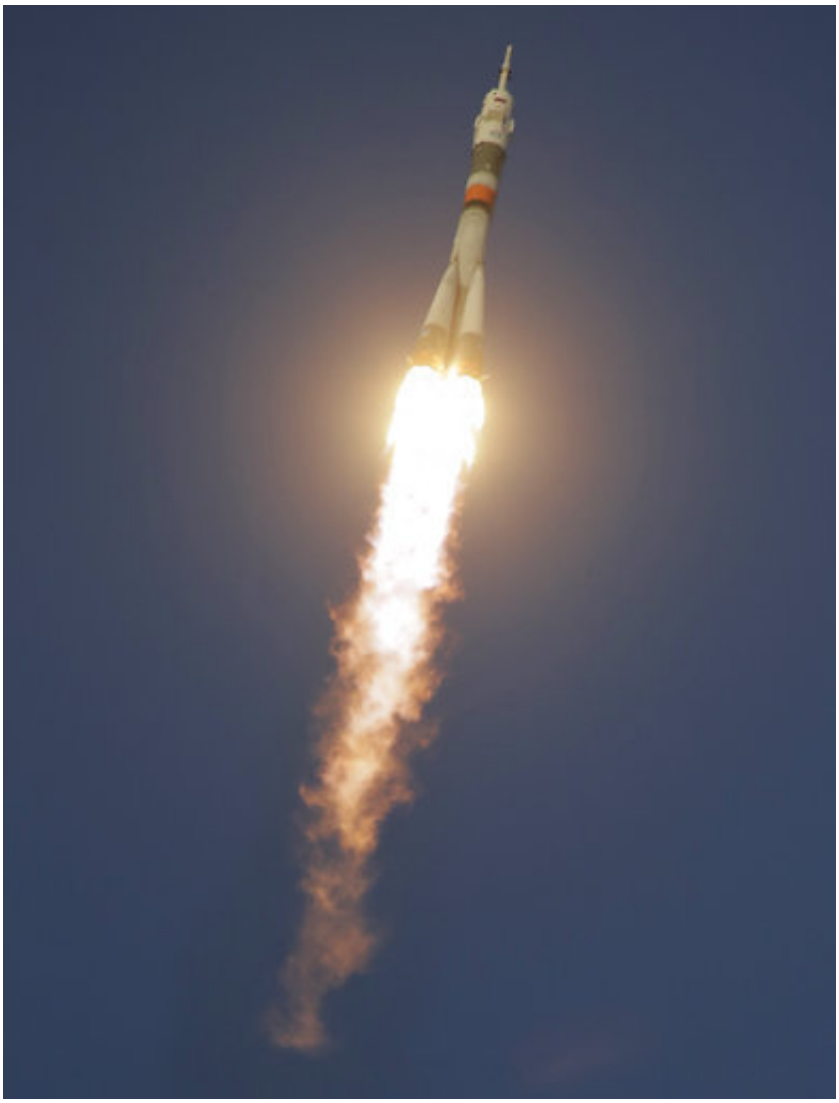
U.S. astronaut Anne McClain, crew member of the mission to the International Space Station, ISS, waves as she boards to the rocket prior to the launch of Soyuz-FG rocket at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. (AP Photo/Shamil Zhumatov, Pool)

U.S. astronaut Anne McClain, member of the main crew to the International Space Station (ISS), interacts with her family from a bus prior to the launch of Soyuz-FG rocket at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky, Pool)

U.S. astronaut Anne McClain, crew member of the mission to the International Space Station, ISS, waves as she boards to the rocket prior to the launch of Soyuz-FG rocket at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. (AP Photo/Shamil Zhumatov, Pool)

U.S. astronaut Anne McClain, left, Russian cosmonaut Oleg Kononenko, centre, and CSA astronaut David Saint Jacques, members of the main crew of the expedition to the International Space Station (ISS), report to head or Russian space agency Dmitry Rogozin prior to the launch of Soyuz MS-11 space ship at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky, Pool)

CSA astronaut David Saint Jacques, crew members of the mission to the International Space Station, ISS, walks to the rocket prior to the launch of Soyuz-FG rocket at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. (AP Photo/Shamil Zhumatov, Pool)



The Soyuz-FG rocket booster with Soyuz MS-11 space ship carrying a new crew to the International Space Station, ISS, flies in the sky at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. The Russian rocket carries U.S. astronaut Anne McClain, Russian cosmonaut Oleg Kononenko, and CSA astronaut David Saint Jacques. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky)

In this photo provided by NASA the Soyuz-FG rocket booster with Soyuz MS-11 space ship carrying a new crew to the International Space Station, ISS, launches from at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. The Russian rocket carries U.S. astronaut Anne McClain, Russian cosmonaut Oleg Kononenko, and CSA astronaut David Saint Jacques. (Aubrey Gemignani/NASA via AP)

A police APC drives prior to the launch of Soyuz MS-11 space ship with U.S. astronaut Anne McClain, Russian cosmonaut Oleg Kononenko and CSA astronaut David Saint Jacques, members of the mission to the International Space Station at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky)

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Expedition 58 Flight Engineer David Saint-Jacques of the Canadian Space Agency (CSA), top, Flight Engineer Anne McClain of NASA, center, and Soyuz Commander Oleg Kononenko of Roscosmos, bottom, wave farewell prior to boarding the Soyuz MS-11 spacecraft for launch, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018 in Baikonur, Kazakhstan. Kononenko. McClain, and Saint-Jacques will spend the next six and a half months onboard the International Space Station. (Aubrey Gemignani/NASA via AP)