

Russia sets first post-crash manned flight for November

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A Soyuz rocket blasts off from the Russian-leased Baikonur cosmodrome early to the International Space Station (ISS), in June 2011. Russia on Tuesday set its next manned space flight to the International Space Station for November and said it will not let the orbiter be abandoned despite a recent accident involving its workhorse Soyuz rocket.

Russia on Tuesday set its next manned space flight to the International Space Station for November and said it will not let the orbiter be abandoned despite a recent accident involving its workhorse Soyuz rocket.

"According to the schedule ... the launch of the manned Soyuz spaceships (has been set for) November 12 and December 20 of this year," Russia's space agency Roskosmos said in a statement.

"The schedule has been put together taking into consideration the readiness of propulsion systems of third-stage rocket boosters," said the statement, noting the move also took into account recommendations of industry officials.

A Soyuz-U rocket carrying an unmanned cargo ship to the International Space Station failed to reach orbit on August 24, instead crashing in Siberia shortly after blast-off.

The first such failure since Soyuz rocket launches began in 1978 prompted Russia to ground its manned flight programme until the causes of the accident were found and raised fresh doubts about the reliability of its Soviet-era technology.

Soyuz rockets are used to launch the unmanned Progress cargo vehicles as well as the Soyuz manned capsules going to the ISS.

Roskosmos also announced plans to send the first post-crash unmanned cargo Progress ferry to the ISS on October 30.

Russia is the only country capable of sending manned missions into space and the accident has prompted a series of urgent consultations with NASA officials who are concerned about the prospect of possibly leaving the ISS unmanned.

A spokesman for the Russian Space Mission Control told AFP later on Tuesday that the resumption of manned and cargo launches indicated that there was no need to evacuate the space station.

"This means that the ISS will constantly operate in piloted mode, with astronauts onboard," spokesman Valery Lyndin told AFP. "Crews will be changed as originally planned, only the schedule will be somewhat pushed back."

The first three of the six spacemen on board the station are due to return to Earth on Friday and NASA had earlier raised the prospect of bringing the remaining crew home if the next manned mission was not sent up by mid-November.

There was no immediate reaction from NASA to Russia's announcement but Roskosmos said it was holding constant consultations with its US colleagues about the upcoming missions.

An unidentified Russian space agency source had

earlier told local news agencies that Roskosmos would prefer to send two unmanned missions to the ISS as a precaution before sending up a manned crew.

Roskosmos did not explain its decision and said only that a second unmanned cargo craft would be sent up on January 26.

Space officials last week blamed the accident on a one-off production fault in a rocket engine.

Analysts have said the crash landing of the spaceship exposed a systemic lack of proper checks and a dearth of qualified staff. The embarrassing accident came after five satellites have failed to reach their orbits since December.

Russia jointly with the European Space Agency is due to begin launches of Soyuz rockets from French Guiana in South America on October 20, carrying satellites for Europe's Galileo navigation programme.

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