

Three astronauts land back on Earth from space station

11 December 2015



The Soyuz TMA-16M space capsule lands outside Zhezkazgan in Kazakhstan on 12 September 2015

Three astronauts, from the United States, Russia and Japan, on Friday successfully completed a rare nighttime landing on Earth in the wintry Kazakh steppe after returning from the International Space Station.

"They have landed safely and the recovery team have found them. Everything is according to plan," a spokesman for Russian space agency Roscosmos told AFP immediately after the landing.

NASA's Kjell Lindgren, Japanese astronaut Kimiya Yui and Russian cosmonaut Oleg Kononenko parachuted down to Earth in their Soyuz capsule in darkness at 7:18 pm local time (1318 GMT) in windy conditions.

"What an amazing experience," Lindgren said as he was monitored by medics on the snow-covered steppe in televised footage.

They were then carried into all-terrain vehicles before being taken by helicopter to the nearby town of Zhezkazgan.

The trio spending 141 days in space after blasting off from Russia's Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan in July.

Their landing was the first night landing of a Soyuz team since November 2012 and only the sixth in the programme's history, adding an extra challenge to the recovery operation.

"Of course, this makes things more complicated but our recovery teams are trained to work day and night in all kinds of weather conditions, so this is not a problem," Mission Control spokesman Sergei Talalasov told AFP.

'Baby birds'

Crew captain Kononenko has now logged a total of 533 days in space while it was Yui and Lindgren's first time on the ISS.

"They arrived in space like baby birds barely able to fly and now they soar home as eagles. Great job Kjell and Kimiya!" tweeted NASA's Scott Kelly, ISS commander, as his colleagues made their way home.

Their landing marks the end of Expedition 45 to the ISS, with three new astronauts set to blast off for the ISS in their Soyuz TMA-19M spacecraft on Tuesday.

Expedition 45's official NASA crew portrait featured Kononenko, Yui and Lindgren as well as US astronaut Scott Kelly and Russians Sergei Volkov and Mikhail Kornienko posing as lightsaber-wielding jedis in a nod to the Star Wars films.

Kelly, Kornienko and Volkov are now awaiting the arrival of British astronaut Tim Peake, American Tim Kopra and Russian Yuri Malenchenko, who will blast off from Kazakhstan on Tuesday.

The ISS space laboratory has been orbiting the

Earth at roughly 28,000 kilometres per hour since 1998.

Space travel has been one of the few areas of international cooperation between Russia and the West that has not been wrecked by the Ukraine crisis.

But the joint space programme has still faced difficulties this year.

Russia put the brakes on all space travel for almost three months 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.

Less than an hour after the Soyuz crew arrived back on earth an Ukrainian-designed Zenit rocket blasted off from the Baikonur cosmodrome carrying a Russian weather satellite.

The launch marked the 83rd time the Zenit rocket has been launched into space since its first flight in 1985.

However, with relations between the two countries ruined by Moscow's seizure of the Crimea region and the ongoing violence in eastern Ukraine it may prove the last of the Zenit launches.

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