

Russia hails resumption of US space shuttle flights

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MOSCOW, July 2 (AFP) - Russia hailed the US decision to resume the space shuttle program grounded since the Columbia disaster in February 2003 by launching the Discovery shuttle on July 13, the ITAR-TASS news agency reported Friday.

"Resumption of regular flights by US ships will allow the International Space Station (ISS) to go back to a permanent three-member team, as well as continue onstruction," the Roscosmos space agency representative said.

"Besides, it will be far easier to supply the ISS with vital cargo," the official said, pointing out that since US shuttle flights were grounded, all cargo deliveries and changes in the ISS team had to be handled by Russia's unmanned Progress cargo ships and Soyuz piloted craft.

The remaining US shuttles have undergone major safety changes since then and the US space agency has been forced to undertake major reforms following the disaster, which cost the lives of Columbia's seven crew members and severely dented US space prestige.

The disaster was blamed on damage sustained by the spacecraft after it was hit by chunks of insulating foam that broke off during liftoff.

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