

Space Agency Delays Manned Launch Till November

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The Federal Space Agency has postponed its launch of the next manned Soyuz spacecraft to the International Space Station until Nov. 12 amid deep concern over a failed supply mission last month.

The launch schedule for manned missions has been thrown into disarray by the Aug. 24 crash of an unmanned Progress supply craft into the remote Siberian wilderness. It was the 44th launch of a Progress to the space station but the first failure in the life of the complex.

The accident delayed the next Soyuz mission because the failed upper stage of the unmanned rocket was similar to that used to launch astronauts.

The agency has insisted that the delay will have no adverse influence on the space station's crew because their existing supplies of food, water and oxygen are sufficient.

The agency said another manned Soyuz launch was scheduled for Dec. 20 and set tentative dates for the launch of two more unmanned Progress supply ships — Oct. 30 and Jan. 26.

Still, nerves will likely be frayed during the next few launches because any glitches could affect the future of the space station.

In a string of spectacular failures, Russia has lost four spacecraft over the past 10 months. In December, a rocket and its payload of three communications satellites fell into the Pacific Ocean after failing to reach orbit. A military satellite was lost in February, and in mid-August the Express-AM4, described by officials as Russia's most powerful telecommunications satellite, was lost.

The space agency said Tuesday that third-stage booster rockets from two Soyuz spacecraft that were to be launched from French Guiana have been returned to Russia for inspection, Itar-Tass reported. The rockets are powered by the same RD-0110 engine that malfunctioned on the Progress.

The planned launch of another two Soyuz carriers from the Guiana Space Center this year will go ahead because their third-stage booster rockets are powered by a different type of engine.

Since phasing out the U.S. space shuttle program earlier this year, NASA is relying entirely on Russia to get American and other astronauts to the International Space Station. The new launch date of Nov. 12 is just days before the remaining astronauts on the orbiting laboratory are due to return to Earth.

Six astronauts are now aboard the station that orbits 350 kilometers above Earth. They are due to return home in two landings — one Friday and another after mid-November.

NASA officials have suggested that the space station might have to be left unmanned if Russia cannot solve its rocket problems. Astronauts have been living aboard the station, without interruption, for almost 11 years.

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