

Soyuz Brings Astronauts Home to Earth

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A helicopter crew getting ready early Tuesday at the Arkalyk airfield prior to the successful recovery mission of a Soyuz spacecraft capsule carrying ISS crewmen, cosmonaut Sergei Volkov, U.S. astronaut **Shamil Zhumatov**

A Russian Soyuz capsule carrying three astronauts back from the International Space Station touched down safely in the snow-covered steppes of Kazakhstan early Tuesday morning.

NASA astronaut Michael Fossum, Russian cosmonaut Sergei Volkov and Satoshi Furukawa of Japan's JAXA space agency landed at the break of dawn some 90 kilometers north of the town of Arkalyk at 8:26 a.m. local time after spending 165 days in space.

A NASA spokesman said the recovery operation was swift despite the freezing weather and strong wind.

Video from the site showed the three men looking well and smiling, although Furukawa looked visibly exhausted. They were seated in chairs and wrapped in warm blankets to help them get adjusted to gravity after spending 5 1/2 months in space.

Russia may spend 2 trillion rubles (\$64 billion) on its space program between 2016 and 2025

as it eyes a manned mission to the moon and plans a new spaceship.

Russia expects to increase spending next year by 50 percent to 150 billion rubles and double it to 200 billion rubles by 2015, Vladimir Popovkin, head of the Federal Space Agency, said Tuesday.

“I have created a working group that is studying a strategy for space development beyond 2015, till 2030 and 2050,” he said.

Over the next decade, Russia will focus its efforts in space exploration on the moon, expecting to launch a manned mission there in 2020-25, Popovkin said, with a manned Mars mission only possible after 2030.

Russia is now working to create a new transport system for a crew of six. The system that will cost more than 10 billion rubles to develop should be ready by 2020, Popovkin said.

✉(AP, Bloomberg)

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