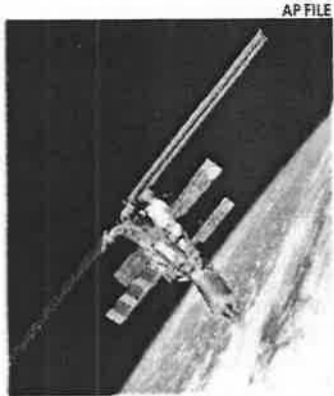


*Crew forced  
out of space  
station as  
debris  
floats close*

**KEVIN DREW**

HONG KONG | MARCH 24

CREW members aboard the International Space Station temporarily scrambled into spacecraft capable of returning them to Earth early on Saturday as remnants of a discarded Russian satellite passed nearby, the latest episode spotlighting the growing amount of space debris encircling the planet.

The crew — three Russians, two Americans and a Dutch astro-

naut — climbed into the two spacecraft as the debris passed within nine miles of the station, at 2:38 am Eastern time. Soon afterward, NASA allowed the astronauts to return to the station. “Nichevo,” or nothing, one Russian astronaut was heard saying in NASA’s live online broadcast.

NASA said it did not notice the debris until Friday, too little time to put more distance between the station and the trajectory of the debris. While NASA expected the

debris to pass by safely, the six astronauts were ordered into the Russian Soyuz spacecraft.

NASA said it could not determine the size of the debris. Even small amounts of debris, however, can pose a danger to the 450-ton space station; the space station and the satellite debris were traveling at speeds of 17,500 miles an hour, NASA said.

Saturday’s episode underscored a recent report by the National Research Council, a non-

profit group, warning that the increasing amount of space debris is threatening to make low-Earth orbit unusable because of the potential for collisions.

The US Space Surveillance Network is tracking more than 22,000 objects larger than 4 inches in size, NASA said, with about 1,000 being some form of spacecraft and the rest being classified as debris. Most of the debris floats within 1,250 miles, or low orbit, of the planet. NYT

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