

'Space station may have to be evacuated by Nov'

Cape Canaveral: Astronauts may need to take the unprecedented step of temporarily abandoning the international space station if last week's Russian launch accident prevents new crews from flying there this fall.

Until officials figure out what went wrong with Russia's essential Soyuz rockets, there will be no way to launch any more astronauts before the current residents have to leave in mid-November. "We have plenty of options," Nasa's space station program manager, Mike Suffredini, assured reporters on Monday. "We'll focus on crew safety as we always do."

Abandoning the space station, even for a short period, would be an unpleasant last resort for the world's five space agencies that have spent decades working on the project. Astronauts have been living aboard the space station since 2000, and the goal is to keep it going until 2020.

Russia lifts suspension on main rocket launches

Russia's space agency gave the green light on Tuesday to resume launches of the main rocket it uses for carrying satellites into space after determining what caused a launch to fail this month. Roskosmos suspended the use of Proton-M rockets after the failed launch on Aug 18, which put the Express-AM4 communications satellite into the wrong orbit. Roskosmos will now draft a new schedule for launches for the rest of 2011. REUTERS

Suffredini said flight controllers could keep a deserted space station operating indefinitely, as long as all major systems are working properly.

The risk to the station goes up, however, if no one is on board to fix equipment breakdowns. AP