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END OF CURRENT MISSION IN SIGHT? On 10 November, Moscow World Service (in English) reported that the cosmonauts "have started using a special suit which can imitate conditions on Earth. In this way the crew that has been in orbit for over 4 months is preparing for its return to Earth." This confirms a report in AW&ST, Nov 7 issue, which reports an interview with Aleksey Yeliseyev in Switzerland, to the effect that "the crew...will be leaving the station before the end of November." Further, says AW&ST, "no new crews are expected to be sent to Salyut-7 until early 1984." The lighting conditions for recovery approach optimal (in terms empirically defined by past observations) about Nov 24. That would be day #150 for Soyuz T-9, an extraordinary increase in the previous mission duration -- so the launch of an unmanned "rescue Soyuz" cannot be excluded. But then, with a fresh Soyuz, why bring the men home at all?

DETAILS ON E.V.A. IN PRAVDA (November 4 issue, page 3). A detailed article by "Constructor V. Vladimirov" is accompanied by a stylized drawing of the assembly operation. It is made clear that the two sets of panels were both installed on the center Salyut array, not on the left and right as earlier assumed by some Western observers. The result increased that panel's power output by 50%. The new arrays appear (in the drawing) to consist of seven panels, each 0.5 meters square. One man is working at the wing itself; the other is standing at the EVA workstation fully out of the hatch. Thus this has been the first (and second) times that two Soviet cosmonauts have actually been fully outside their spacecraft simultaneously on purpose (Romanenko and Grechko were reportedly so in Dec 1977, by accident). I have not seen any photographs or videotape of the operation. Of interest is one Soviet report that shows two cosmonauts performing this operation in the neutral buoyancy water pool: it identifies them as Kizim and Solovyov, who evidently were the backup crew for either T-9 or T-10A, probably the former. I expect we all have noted that planned EVAs seem to occur only when Progress vehicles are attached -- a Soviet comment was that the airlock repressurization comes from the Progress supplies. The Dec 1977 and the Aug 1979 EVAs were contingencies -- no Progress attached.

MORE AW&ST FROM YELISEYEV. That same Nov. 7 article also quotes Yeliseyev saying that the Indian cosmonaut would fly in April (prime crew Malyshev, Rukavishnikov, Sharma; backup crew Berezovoy, Grechko, Malhotra). "Yeliseyev also said several Soviet women cosmonaut candidates remain in training, but no new near-term flights with female crewmembers are anticipated." An exact quotation from Yeliseyev: "For the time being, we don't have any new flights planned for them." And as for a second French spationaute mission, Yeliseyev confirmed that the Soviets are not interested and are not discussing it with French officials.

EXPLODED COSMONAUTS SEEN IN PUBLIC. During the Great October Socialist Revolution celebration on November 7 (my birthday), there was a televised two-way conversation between cosmonauts Titov and Strelakov in Red Square and Lyakhov and Aleksandrov in orbit. The announcer made no comment on the significance of the identity of the two earthbound cosmonauts, and I do not as yet have the transcript of what was said.

EDITORIAL: If the Salyut-7 is left unmanned it is a major setback for the Soviet cosmonaut program, possibly the biggest since the Salyut disasters of 1971-1972. If a new long-duration crew is launched early next year, a crew handover mission would not be expected until summer -- a delay of almost a year.



ПРАВДА 4 НОВ



Рис. В. Лукьянца

ИЛЛЮСТРАЦИЯ ПОДПИСАНА

С О В Е Т С К И Й С О Ю З И С

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[TASS report: "An Explosion Could Have Occurred"]

[Excerpts] New York, 14 Oct -- The launching of the U.S. reusable spacecraft "Challenger" on 30 August this year under the Shuttle program almost ended in a catastrophe. It is clear from a statement by Major General J. Abrahamson, NASA associate director for space transportation systems, that at the launch phase the heat shield of one of the booster nozzles with whose aid ships of this type are put into near-earth orbit was almost completely burned away. If the nozzle wall had burned through to the section separating the booster from the auxiliary fuel tank, then a fire and an explosion could have occurred on the spacecraft.

ABC described this incident as "a serious blow to the entire Shuttle Program." NASA representatives point out that the launching of a reusable spaceship -- the "Columbia" this time -- scheduled for 5 November will almost certainly be deferred for at least a few weeks or even 1-2 months. All this in fact jeopardizes the fulfillment of the immediate flight schedule for spacecraft under the Shuttle program.

The malfunction which was detected was by no means the only one during Challenger's recent flight. As THE NEW YORK TIMES pointed out, "During the flight one of the spacecraft's on-board computers began to produce distorted information." According to the newspaper, "The most serious malfunctions were revealed when testing the new system for communicating between earth and the spacecraft." Observers recall that the first Challenger launching on 4 April was deferred repeatedly because of numerous malfunctions in the engines and other spacecraft systems.