Crew launch to ISS paves way for ‘stranded’ astronauts’ return

AFP- Not long to go now: After more than nine months on the International Space Station, two astronauts are a step closer to returning home following the launch of a crew swap mission on Friday.

A Falcon 9 rocket with a Crew Dragon fixed to its top blasted off from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida at 7:03 pm (2303 GMT), carrying a four-member team bound for the orbital outpost.

“We celebrate the countless individuals all over the world that have made this journey possible,” said astronaut Nichole Ayers, the designated pilot of the Crew-10 mission, just before launch.

But the real focus is what their arrival enables: the long-overdue departure from the ISS of NASA duo Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams.

The two former US Navy pilots have been stuck aboard the orbital lab since June after the Boeing Starliner spacecraft they were testing on its maiden crewed voyage suffered propulsion issues and was deemed unfit to fly them back to Earth.

Instead, Starliner returned empty, without experiencing further major issues – and what was meant to have been a days-long roundtrip for Wilmore and Williams has now stretched past nine months.

That is significantly longer than the standard ISS rotation for astronauts of roughly six months.

But it is much shorter than the US space record of 371 days set by NASA astronaut Frank Rubio aboard the ISS in 2023, or the world record held by Russian cosmonaut Valeri Polyakov, who spent 437 continuous days aboard the Mir space station.

Still, the unexpected nature of their prolonged stay away from their families – they had to receive additional clothing and personal care items because they hadn't packed enough – has garnered interest and sympathy.

– 'Maybe they love each other' –

What began as a technical failure has also spiraled into a political flashpoint, as President Donald Trump and his close advisor, Elon Musk – who leads SpaceX – have repeatedly suggested that former president Joe Biden "abandoned" the pair intentionally and rejected a plan to bring them back sooner.

That accusation caused uproar in the space community, especially since Musk did not provide any specifics.

The plan for the duo's return has been unchanged ever since they were reassigned to SpaceX's Crew-9, which arrived in September aboard another Dragon carrying only two crew members – instead of the usual four – to make room for Wilmore and Williams.

When Danish astronaut Andreas Mogensen pointed this out on X, Musk lashed out at him, using a slur for mentally disabled people.

Some retired astronauts rushed to Mogensen's defense – while Wilmore appeared to back Musk, saying his comments must have been "factual," though he admitted he was not privy to any details.

Trump, meanwhile, has drawn attention for his bizarre remarks about the situation, referring to Williams, a decorated former naval captain, as "the woman with the wild hair" and

speculating about the personal dynamic between the two.

“They’ve been left up there – I hope they like each other, maybe they love each other, I don’t know,” he said during a recent White House press conference.

Only after the Crew-10 spaceship docks – scheduled for 11:30 pm Saturday – can the Crew-9 team begin preparing for departure and their ocean splashdown off the Florida coast, no sooner than March 19.

Along with Wilmore and Williams, NASA astronaut Nick Hague and Russian cosmonaut Aleksandr Gorbunov will also be aboard the returning Dragon capsule.

Space remains an area of cooperation between the United States and Russia despite the Ukraine conflict, with cosmonauts traveling to the ISS aboard SpaceX Crew Dragons and astronauts doing the same via Soyuz capsules launched from Kazakhstan.

The Crew-10 team consists of NASA astronauts Anne McClain and Nichole Ayers, Japan’s Takuya Onishi, and Russia’s Kirill Peskov. During their mission, the new crew will conduct a range of scientific experiments, including flammability tests for future spacecraft designs and research into the effects of space on the human body.

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