

Atlantis arrives to take Sunita back home

Indian American astronaut Sunita Williams welcomed the crew of US space shuttle Atlantis to her home in space as it arrived to take her back after a six month sojourn amid stars.

Mission Specialist Clayton Anderson who will switch places with Sunita and the six other crew floated into the International Space Station as the hatches between the station and shuttle opened at 5.20 p.m. Sunday (02.50 a.m. IST Monday).

'Atlantis, arriving,' Williams sang out as her NASA colleagues scrambled aboard about two hours after the two spacecraft linked up at 3.36 p.m. (01.06 a.m. IST Monday) as they sailed 220 miles over the western Pacific Ocean.

Anderson will officially become a member of Expedition 15 when his custom-made seat liner is swapped out with Williams' in the Soyuz spacecraft docked to the station, US space agency NASA said. He would return to Earth with this year's third NASA space mission in October.

Atlantis on the 21st shuttle mission to visit the station is scheduled to undock June 17 and return to Earth on the 19th with Sunita and six other crewmembers heading back after a weeklong stay at the station.

Sunita who has already spent more time on spacewalks than any other woman will June 16 break Shannon Lucid's 188-day record, set in 1996, for the longest space flight by a woman.

Atlantis crew also delivered a new truss segment to the orbital outpost. They will fix it to the station Monday using the shuttle's robotic arm to lift the truss segment out of Atlantis' payload bay and hand it off to the station arm.

Mission Specialists John 'Danny' Olivas and Jim Reilly will make connections between the station and the new truss segment, which contains a new set of solar arrays to give more power to the station during the first of three scheduled space walks.

About an hour before docking, Commander Frederick Sturckow and Pilot Lee Archambault guided the shuttle through a back-flip manoeuvre that allowed the crew to photograph the protective heat-resistant tiles on the shuttle's belly.

The pictures will help NASA determine if the shuttle sustained any damage from debris during Friday's launch. So far the only damage that has been noticed is a small piece of insulating blanket that peeled back near the rear of the shuttle during takeoff and exposed a few inches of the ship's inner layers.

If experts determine the damage poses a threat to the safety of the shuttle, which encounters high temperatures when it returns to earth a space walking astronaut could repair it.

Since the 2003 Columbia accident, the space agency has been particularly sensitive to issues involving fuel tank foam. Columbia's tank shed a piece of insulation during lift off, which smashed into the ship's wing and broke a hole in its heat shield.

The shuttle was destroyed as it attempted to fly through the atmosphere for landing 16 days later, killing all seven astronauts aboard, including Indian born Kalpana Chawla on her second space mission.

Atlantis was originally scheduled to fly in mid-March, but two weeks before blast-off the spaceship's fuel tank was damaged during a freak hailstorm that passed over the Kennedy Space Centre Feb 26.

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