



Virtual Mars mission approaching 'landing'

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MOSCOW, Feb. 2 (UPI) -- The first full-duration simulation of a manned voyage to Mars has reached virtual Mars after 244 days of virtual interplanetary flight, Russian officials said.

Mars500, an international study of the psychological and technical issues involved in long spaceflights, has been running for more than eight months in hermetically sealed modules imitating a Mars spacecraft at the Institute of Biomedical Problems in Moscow, a European Space Agency release said Wednesday.

The crew of three Russians, two Europeans and one Chinese, living and working in the facility to simulate a real expedition to Mars, will "land" Feb. 12 and conduct three sorties onto a simulated Martian terrain, officials said.

The first expedition onto the simulated Martian surface, housed in a large hall alongside the Mars500 modules, will take place Feb. 14.

Alexandr Smoleevskiy and Diego Urbina will don spacesuits and exit the simulated lander's airlock.

The lander will be loaded with rubbish and unwanted items Feb. 28 and the vehicle will be "abandoned" March 1, as the "spacecraft" departs from Mars by virtually firing its engines.

The crew will endure another monotonous "interplanetary cruise" before arriving home in early November 2011.

During the months of simulated flight, the crew has been on a schedule similar to astronauts on the International Space Station, filling work time during the "flight" with maintenance work, scientific experiments and daily exercise.