

Simulated Mars mission reaches one year

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MOSCOW, June 3 (UPI) -- The six men in the Mars500 facility in Moscow, simulating a mission to Mars, have been in isolation for 365 days, researchers said.

The crew of six -- three Russians, two Europeans and one Chinese -- walked into their isolation modules June 3, 2010, to begin their virtual mission toward the Red Planet, a European Space Agency release said Friday. They've not actually gone anywhere in the 12 months, but in theory they have been to Mars and are on the way back, the ESA said.

The facility, faithfully attempting to mimic every aspect of an interplanetary flight without really flying into space, is composed of four sealed interconnected cylinders with a total volume of about 19,000 cubic feet.

Each crew member has his own private cabin and they live and work in a routine very much like the astronauts on the Space Station, the ESA said.

"The dark side of this routine is that every day for the past year we woke up at the same time to do the same medical controls with the same devices: no weekend or holiday breaks for a year!" writes ESA crew member Romain Charles has written in his diary.

After the first months life settled into a routine and the crew waited for Mars "arrival" at the end of January.

They "docked" with a "lander" -- in reality, another module connected to their main habitation modules -- that had been waiting with supplies "in orbit" around Mars.

They completed three "surface walks" in spacesuits into a big hall built to resemble the Martian surface, collecting samples, setting up experiments and driving a rover like real "marsonauts" will do one day, the ESA said.

The crew will "arrive" home on Nov. 5 when the hatch of the isolation facility is opened but the mission will go on for some weeks after that, with medical checks and debriefings.