

Why the first Afghan Spaceman became a German Citizen.

1988, Soyuz TM6: Afghan guest onboard

The mission TM-6 to the Russian space station MIR was launched into orbit on 29. Aug. 1988 from Baikonur on a SL-4 launch vehicle. Two days later the Soyuz TM-6 spacecraft coupled with the MIR station, which at the time was operating in a 338 x 364 km orbit with 51.6 ° equatorial inclination.

The crew consisted of the two Soviet cosmonauts W. Lyakhov and V. Poljakov and the Afghan military pilot Ahad Momand. Poljakow's task was to remain onboard as medical support for the two long term cosmonauts A. Solovyov and V. Savinych which sought to establish a new space flight long-term record. For this Soyuz



The Soyuz TM-6 crew and back-up team (Ahad Momand 3rd from right).

mission hosting a guest cosmonaut, only a small scientific-technical program with 24 experiments had been prepared. The launch date of the Afghan pilot had to be suddenly advanced in time because of the expected withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1988, so that the Afghan cosmonaut and his equipment for the MIR visit were not optimally prepared. Nevertheless, Ahad Momand spent a week in the space station with his four Soviet comrades performing all of the planned simple biomedical experiments under weightlessness conditions. Also a small aquarium with various fish was onboard, whose swimming patterns under microgravity were documented on film with various cameras. In addition Ahad Momand concentrated on photographing and

mapping his homeland Afghanistan. On the 5th of September the MIR visit of the guest cosmonaut came to an end. Together with his Soviet pilot Lyakhov, Momand went into the spacecraft Soyuz TM-5, which the previous crew had used to come to the space station and was docked to MIR since then. The return load also included the results of the biomedical experiments. The returning flight of the TM-5 capsule turned out to be very difficult due to arising various technical problems, for some time there even was the danger of a looming catastrophe. First there were problems with the sensors for the 3-axis alignment of the capsule



Momand and his two crew mates Lyakhov and Polyakov in the return capsule. (Momand outer left next to Lyakhov)

and with the actuation system or its computer control. Several times the ignition of the engines failed to slow down the re-entry speed, or the burn-time was too short. For two days, the two men were unable to maneuver the capsule and had to circle the Earth in an unfavorable parking orbit. The situation soon became very critical because of the lack of food, water, sanitary facilities and an oxygen supply for only two days. The tightness in the capsule while they had to wear their spacesuits compounded the situation even further, but they remained cool by “keeping their sense of humor” as Momand and Lyakhov reported afterwards.

Finally, Lyakhov managed to stabilize the capsule and patch up the computer problems after frantic reprogramming, the engine fired at the right time for 230 seconds at the calculated angle, so that the men were able to target the correct landing spot in the Kazakh desert. The touch-down took place on 7. Sept. 1988, the guest mission lasted 8 days, 20 hours and 27 minutes. [1]

The follow-up mission TM-7 was the second flight of Sergei Krikalev, which led to his unplanned stay of 311 days 20 hrs on MIR because of the political turmoil in the USSR and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1992.

Before returning to Earth Momand had sent a message of peace to the world from the space station: "I do not see any tanks or borders from up here". But his appeal to the world to help his damaged country to be rebuild, remained unheard, Momand still criticizes today. [2]

1989, Momand's second trip to "outer space"

After the hasty withdrawal of the Russians from Afghanistan in February 1989, the soviet-loyal regime in Kabul was put on the defensive. When the insurgent Mujahideen and Taliban conquered Kabul in 1992, Momand, who has become Deputy Minister of Tourism and Aviation for a year, had to flee with his wife and daughter. First to India, then to Germany, where his brother lived. [2]. "My second trip to outer space has been the more difficult one", Momand said when he sought political asylum in Germany – "the language, the laws, the culture, everything was new. The flight to MIR was something I could prepare myself for, but I was not able to do the same thing for my voyage to Germany." All he had with him on arriving here in 1992 was his family and one suitcase, after hastily escaping the Mujahideen. Momand's space trip was a propaganda mission, the Soviets selected Momand, who had fought against the Mujahideen, out of 20 jet-fighter pilots.



Czech-made L39 fighter jet trainer re-visited by Ahmed Momand

"I did not have any acquaintances in the government or the politburo – I was a simple army officer," he says. As a kid growing up in Sardah, south of Kabul, he had always dreamt of becoming a pilot in one of the aircraft he saw flying high over his tiny village. Momand still believes his space trip had a deeper meaning. He points to a map of Afghanistan, which was pieced together with the help of the pictures he had taken during his mission. He also remembers the peace message he broadcast from space, in the hope that it would make a difference to his war-torn country. Compared with his previous life, his existence in Germany seems one of eternal calmness. [3]

When Momand arrived in Germany, he found a job in a space-research institute, but soon the need for better pay led him to other work, several rungs down the ladder from adventure to crushing banality. Now he works in a small trading company whose precise activities seem to bore him. "It is not in space," he says. [4].

In his tidy house, at the outskirts of Stuttgart, only a painted picture depicting the cosmos, a poster about a conference in the early 1990s on outer space in Norway and a small metal model of a Soyuz TM aluminum capsule act as a reminder of a long-gone life. Momand still nurtures the hope that his former glory will one day take him back to Afghanistan, where he has not set foot since he left almost 25 years ago. "I would very much like to help my country, but without a job offer this is not possible," he says ... and then he adds:

"Maybe one day the incumbent Afghanistan's president will read this article and call me back to my home country". [5]

References:

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