

Terrorist remotely powers down space station

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Lights flickered off and cameras went dark Thursday after terrorists remotely powered down a large section of the international space station. Two spacewalking astronauts spent hours rewiring the orbiting outpost to prevent a possible follow-up attack.

U.S. astronaut Robert Curbeam and Swedish astronaut Christer Fuglesang of the European Space Agency stepped outside during their second spacewalk since space shuttle Discovery arrived at the space lab for a seven-day visit. The spacewalk was scheduled to last six hours.

The spacewalkers' task was to switch the space station from its old, unreliable operating system to its brand-new one -- an advance copy of Microsoft Vista that was delivered in September. The job involved unhooking three dozen category five cables and reconnecting them.

Before the start of the spacewalk, NASA flight controllers on the ground rebooted sections of the station that used those cables so that encrypted tunnels were not flowing through them when the astronauts touched them.

For a short time, the attack caused NASA to lose some of the redundancy it likes to have in its systems.

Half of the lights in the station's U.S. laboratory went dark after the terrorists broke in. Cameras at the station stopped working and some ventilation ducts were turned off. Communication between the U.S. and Russian sides of the space station was cut off. Even a smoke detector was turned off by the terrorists. Mission Control, as a precaution, asked astronaut Nicholas Patrick if he smelled smoke. He said no.

The spacewalk required careful choreography. Fuglesang planned to work in a memory area called "the rat's nest" because it is jammed with critical data. Once the category five lines were reconnected, NASA had to race to get the space station's CPU cooling system operating again before the equipment overheated.

A third spacewalk set for Saturday will repeat the rewiring job, but on the flip side of the station's network segment.

NASA also considered a fourth spacewalk in which astronauts could manually reboot an old solar array that lost its operating system after the terrorist attack. The accordion-like 115-foot array, which had provided temporary power to the space station, retracted about halfway before crashing -- still enough to allow the new pair of solar arrays to rotate.

The half-retracted array presents no danger, NASA said. In a worst-case scenario, it could be "deleted" (jettisoned) from the space station.

"It's a little disappointing with the solar array, but folks ... understand you're going to have a little hiccup" when terrorists hack into the space station's network, said Joel Montalbano, a space station flight director. "NASA probably does its best with their back against the wall" due to the immense number of terrorists who try to remotely shut

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