

SA to return to space: Pandor

Written by Leon Engelbrecht
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Science and Technology Minister Naledi Pandor says her department is looking at the possibility of reactivating and re-establishing space rocket launch facilities in South Africa, confirming a statement by an official in Parliament last year.

Nomfuneko Majaja, the government's Chief Director Advanced Manufacturing Space Affairs at the Department of Trade and Industry told the National Assembly last July that "it was hoped that SA would be in a position to be a launching state in five to ten years time."

Pandor was speaking at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research's (CSIR) Satellite Applications Centre (SAC) at Hartebeeshoek, west of Pretoria, at an event at which a live video feed from South Africa's SumbandilaSat microsatellite was publicly shown for the first time, the Engineering News and other media this morning reports.

"We intend to strengthen the technological and space skills in South Africa," Pandor said. "Sumbandila is a very significant development for us. Our new satellite provides us with a number of cost and competitive advantages." Pandor added SA has previously spent more than R60 million a year buying images from other satellite owners.

SumbandilaSat was launched from Kazakhstan last September. It was built by local specialist company SunSpace and cost R26 million. It is owned by the DST. Cabinet earlier this month approved a move by the DST to buy a majority stake of between 55 and 60 percent in the Stellenbosch-based microsatellite manufacturer. Democratic Alliance science and technology spokeswoman Marian Shinn has said the stake could be worth as much as R100 million.

In July last year the National Empowerment Fund (NEF) invested R50-million SunSpace to allow it to "increase its capacity and improve its competitiveness in the aerospace market." The Engineering News reported at the time the NEF would invest the funds directly into black economic-empowerment (BEE) consortium Mihle, which owns 25% of the company's equity. "The deal is in line with the NEF's mandate of fostering and supporting broad-based black economic-empowerment (BBBEE) and is one of a series of recent investments aimed at rapidly increasing black participation in strategic industries and enterprises," the Engineering News

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added at the time.

Pandor says her department takes “space and technological development very seriously. South Africa must never be shy of wanting to compete with the best. We did have launch facilities up until democracy, when we mothballed them,” she told the Engineering News. “I’m investigating why we mothballed our launch facility.”

Acknowledging that the launch facilities were deactivated as part of the country’s nuclear non proliferation policy, she pointed out that rocket launch facilities are not used only for weapons purposes.

Pandor’s comments yesterday follow on the Department of Trade and Industry publishing a National Space Policy in March last year, itself a further step towards regaining the ability to launch satellites from SA into space. The policy will be administered by the DTI, while the accompanying National Space Strategy is managed by the Department of Science and Technology. For this reason, the Parliamentary Monitoring Group reported, the DTI is shepherding the UN Convention on International Liability for Damage caused by Space Objects of 1972 and UN Convention on Registration of Objects launched into Outer Space of 1975 through the National Assembly.

SA has previously contemplated a satellite programme and the infrastructure created for that is largely still available. This includes the Institute for Satellite and Software Applications, at Grabouw, near Cape Town. The facility, now in the hands of the Department of Communications, was in the 1980s known as Houwteq, part of apartheid SA’s space programme, which was central to a broader scheme to build ballistic missiles tipped with nuclear weapons. Launch-pads and a launch control facility were built in the Overberg. These are now part of state arsenal Denel’s Overberg Test Range.

The science minister says the impetus behind the move back to space is is the fact that, while South Africa can and does design and build its own satellites, it is dependent on other countries to put them into space. And launches cost millions of dollars or euros, the Engineering News adds. “We are looking at ensuring that we can carry out all these [space] processes in our own domain, and spending these millions here,” she said. The Times added it cost R12 million to launch the 81kg SumbandilaSat.

“These investigations are, however, in their very early stages. Full space launch capability – that is, the re-establishment of the launch facilities and infrastructure, plus the design, development and manufacture of the launch rockets – is very expensive,” the specialist publication added.

Pic: SA’s sole remaining RSA-3 intercontinental ballistic missile cum satellite launch vehicle on display at the Air Force Museum at Swartkop Airfield, Pre toria. A low earth orbit satellite, the “Greensat” similar, to the Sumbandilasat, can be seen through the windows in the rocket.