

We See an African 'Astronaissance'

South African scientist Peter Martinez headed the Local Organizing Committee for the International Astronautical Congress (IAC). Dr. Martinez is the chairman of the South African Council for Space Affairs, which oversees space activities in South Africa. He is division head for Space Science and Technology at the South African Astronomical Observatory. Dr. Martinez has made important contributions to the development of South Africa's national space policies. He holds a doctorate in astrophysics from the University of Cape Town, and contributes to international policymaking in space affairs.



At the final count, 345 African delegates, from 13 African nations, attended the Congress. A special Developing Countries Support Programme (DCSP) had been organized by the International Astronautical Federation to support the participation of delegates. Twenty of the 30 participants supported by the DCSP program were from Africa.

Dr. Martinez was interviewed by Marsha Freeman on the first day of the IAC, Oct. 3, in Cape Town.

EIR: As the head of the local committee that organized this first-ever Congress of the International Astronautical Federation in Africa, you must be very pleased by the turnout.

Martinez: We've got about 2,800 delegates registered. We're very excited about that. I think it shows the interest by the global space community in finding out about that's happening in the African space arena, and the potentials that it holds, not only for space in Africa, but the potential for cooperation and commercial applications of space technology in Africa and the markets associated with that.

EIR: How many African countries sent delegates to the Congress?

Martinez: There are 53 countries in Africa, and I would be surprised if all 53 are represented here; it will probably be fewer than half. But still, in terms of space development in Africa, that would be a significantly higher number than you might have attracted, had this Congress been held, say, ten years ago. We're seeing a birth of a number of space programs in Africa, hence the theme of the conference, "An African Astronaissance."

EIR: All of the speakers at the opening session of the Congress today made it very clear that they were welcoming the delegates from all over the world, on behalf of *all* of Africa.

Martinez: We were very conscious that this was the first IAC for the continent, and when we bid to host it, we submitted our bid as an African bid. Our perspective has always been that it's a Congress *for* Africa, and we've taken a great deal of care to involve our African colleagues in the planning leading up to this Congress, and to ensure that this Congress responds not only to our interests and needs, but the interests and needs of Africa, in general.

An All-African Space Agency?

EIR: Last year, at a conference of African leaders, there was discussion of forming an African Space Agency, similar to the European Space Agency. At that time, you were quoted saying that such an organization would be premature. What are your thoughts on that?

Martinez: This exact question was discussed at the African Leadership Conference on Space Science and Technology, held in Mombasa last week. And I am pleased to say that the heads of the other African space agencies who were on the panel discussing this very subject, all expressed views very much in line with my own personal opinion, which is that it would be premature at this stage for Africa to develop a continental space agency.

I think where we are now is that we're seeing the birth of coordinated space activities at a national level. Countries need to develop their space activities, and experience, and operational programs first, and then develop experience in cooperating with each other in executing space activities jointly.

There are many, many challenges and issues to overcome in conducting joint space projects. In the fullness of time, I think we will see whether we need a con-

tinental space agency, or if some other modality of co-operation would suffice. It's not clear to me that one needs to establish a new institution. Perhaps just very good coordination and networking amongst a series of strong African space agencies would achieve the same results, but in a more efficient manner.

EIR: How have the development and achievements in South Africa in space science and technology radiated to other African nations?

Martinez: I think the most significant role, perhaps, is an inspirational one, of being a kind of role model for the African continent, demonstrating that such things *can* be done in Africa, by Africans. An example of that is the Sumbandila satellite, which was developed in South Africa, and designed, built, and operated in this country, with, really, a very small percentage of components that were imported from elsewhere.

Other projects, such as the Southern African Large Telescope, which is currently the largest single telescope in the Southern Hemisphere, and projects like the MeerKAT radio telescope—all of those demonstrate technological and scientific capability here,

on the continent, and, I think, serve to inspire other African nations. And, incidentally, I should say that all of these projects are being pursued in a manner that is quite open to collaboration with other African countries.

In terms of the MeerKAT and Square Kilometer Array (SKA) projects—the SKA is very much an African bid to host this very large instrument, simply because of the continental dimensions of the array, once it's built. So we have stations as far north as Ghana, which are projected; and interestingly, Nigeria is another country in the region that has strong capability in radio astronomy. It's very exciting to be working with these countries on SKA.

Also, in the domain of satellite technology, there is an African Resource Monitoring Constellation. This is a project whereby each country contributes one satellite to the constellation, but has access to the data from the other satellites. At the moment, the ARMC project is being led by Algeria, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, but it is, in principle, open to other countries to join at the level appropriate to their development and needs.



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