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SA to unveil 'eye of Africa'

09/11/2005 13:03 - (SA)

Sivuyile Mangxamba

Cape Town - The inauguration of the southern hemisphere's largest telescope on Thursday would be a milestone towards realising the country's aim as a "first rate science" country, astronomers said this week.

The Salt (Southern African Largest Telescope), to be unveiled by President Thabo Mbeki near the arid Karoo town of Sutherland, will give astronomers a first rate glimpse of distant stars, galaxies and quasars.

Some of these were a billion times too faint to be seen with the unaided eye - and are as faint as a candle flame on the Moon's surface, astronomers have said.

"Government regards Salt as a flagship project for human quest for technology. It's about showing that first rate science can happen here," said Dave Laney of the Southern Africa Astronomical Observatory (SAAO).

"It allows people to see something happening here as opposed to science always being seen as happening in the United States, Europe or Japan," Laney said.

Salt will "allow us to do things we could only dream of", said Laney.

With a mirror diameter of 11 metres Salt has a maximum resolution of 0.25 arcseconds - which theoretically would enable an observer to spot a small coin at a distance of 10 kilometres.

'It's the first major science event of the new South Africa'

Salt cost \$20m and took five years to complete.

Funded by a consortium of international partners from South Africa, the United States, Germany, Poland, Britain and New Zealand, Salt will gather more than 25 times as much light as any existing African telescope.

Weighing in at a mammoth 82 tons, Salt is situated in a perfect geographical area in the remote town of Sutherland, one of the coldest and most arid places in South Africa about 350 kilometres northeast of Cape Town.

"It's an area devoid of light pollution... it is in such a dry area that it does not get enough rain and as a result scientists are hampered by cloud cover when they need to do their work," Salt spokesperson Mitzi Du Plessis said.

It would be beneficial for South Africa not only to look at the stars, but also reversing the country's so-called "brain-drain" by offering the latest technology available to young students to gain their confidence, she said.

"Salt is reversing the brain-drain because it's offering cutting edge science," Du Plessis said.

"It's the first major science event of the new South Africa," added Phil Charles, the SAAO's director.

"With a major telescope like that, you are not looking at a five year project, you are looking at being here for decades," he added.

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Rand/€	9.3100
Gold/oz	\$637.23
Gold Mining	3190.27 +3.63%
All-share index	22375.73 -0.28%

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