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Minister Opens KAT Site, Unveils Model

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The construction of the Karoo Array Telescope has taken a step forward with the opening of the site where a prototype of the KAT will be built.

The building of the KAT should boost South Africa's chances in the bid to host the world's largest radio telescope ever, the Square Kilometre Array telescope (SKA).

"Through building this prototype and the KAT, South Africa is proving that it has the capacity and expertise to build high-tech radio astronomy instruments," the department of science and technology said.

Science and Technology Minister Mosibudi Mangena also unveiled a 1:50 scale model of the prototype dish at the Hartebeesthoek Radio Astronomy Observatory (HartRAo) in the North West on Thursday.

Scheduled to be ready by 2010, the KAT is set to be a world class research instrument in its own right, providing scientists and students with an opportunity to conduct studies on pulsars, cosmic magnetism, dark matter and dark energy, amongst others.

It will consist of an array of 20 dishes, each 15m in diameter and will be remotely operated from Cape Town.

The KAT will be built through a series of prototypes, each aimed at solving specific design or technology challenges.

It will collaborate with the Southern African Large Telescope (SALT) to form a formidable and powerful astronomical tool and to further boost Southern Africa's profile as a premier astronomy destination, the department said.

The KAT prototype is expected to be on site at the HartRAo by March 2007 and should be commissioned by July 2007.

According to the department, the first light experiments with ten dishes on site would start in may 2009, and by December 2009, the full array of 20 dishes must be installed at the Karoo site.

The department and the National Lotteries Board (NLB) will jointly fund the initial phase of KAT to

the value of about R300 million.

South Africa is looking forward to hosting the SKA - to be built between 2014 and 2020.

The country has been short-listed as one of two possible sites to host the SKA.

If South Africa is selected to host the SKA, the core of the telescope will be located in the Karoo area of the Northern Cape, with outer stations distributed throughout South Africa and other African states.

Speaking at the event, Minister Mangena said the construction of the KAT would take two years to complete.

"The initiative will draw international recognition and we will pride ourselves with it.

"What is more exciting about the project is that young people are spearheading it, and by that we would like to attract more young people into science related fields," he said.

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