

Africa eyes joint space agency

September 4 2012, by Ian Timberlake



An Ariane 5 rocket blasts off in 2007 with a RASCOM-QAF1 telecommunications satellite for Africa. African nations would work together in peaceful space research under a proposal for a space agency being considered Wednesday at a meeting in Sudan of the continent's communications and IT ministers.

African nations would work together in peaceful research under a proposal for a space agency being considered Wednesday at a meeting in Sudan of the continent's communications and IT ministers.

The agency, to be called AfriSpace, would enable "cooperation among African states in space research and technology and their space applications," says a working document issued for the conference.

When they last met in Nigeria two years ago, the ministers asked the African Union Commission to conduct a feasibility study for AfriSpace.

The study, which aims to provide a "roadmap for the creation of the African Space Agency", would be considered at the two-day ministerial meeting starting Wednesday in the Sudanese capital, the working document said.

It noted only "a tiny minority" of countries control space technologies which play a major role in everything from broadcasting to weather forecasting, agriculture, health, and environmental monitoring.

"A common continental approach will allow the sharing of risks and costs and ensure the availability of skilled and sufficient human resources," the document said.

"It will also ensure a critical size of geographical area and population required in terms of the plan of action for some space applications."

Among its roles, AfriSpace would implement a long-term African space policy, recommend "space objectives" to member states, and coordinate orbital slots and other space resources, the document said.

Twenty years ago African nations decided to create the Regional African Satellite Communication Organisation (RASCOM), an intergovernmental commercial agency which in 2007 launched a pan-African telecommunications satellite.

A replacement satellite was launched from French Guyana in August 2010 to support health and education projects, broadband connectivity as well as voice, Internet, radio and TV broadcasting, RASCOM said on its website.

As broadband growth expands in Africa, information and communications technology demand is soaring, another conference document said.

"Demand, around 300 gigabits per second in 2009, will reach 6,000 gigabits per second by 2018," it said.

The African Union has applied internationally to use .Africa as an Internet address which it says would be "a distinctive pan-African identification."

It says a decision is expected next year by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which coordinates online domain names.

A working paper for the Khartoum conference asks ministers to "urgently" provide written support for the .Africa project. It says 70 percent of the continent's 54 nations have already given that backing.

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