

South Africa to assist NASA Mars mission

SAinfo reports that the South African Space Agency's (Sansa's) Space Operations directorate has been selected by the United States' National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to provide tracking services for the launch of its US\$2.3-billion Mars mission.

The Mars Science Laboratory - part of NASA's long-term programme to explore Mars via robotic devices - aims to land and operate a rover, named Curiosity, on the surface of Mars.

Sansa Space Operations' Hartbeeshoek Telemetry Station support will be required during the launch of the spacecraft on an Atlas V rocket from the Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida. Sansa will be paid an undisclosed amount for providing their services to the Americans. "It is a privilege to be a part of this space mission, and this gives testament to the technological expertise that is available in South Africa to support such large-scale investments," Sansa Space Operation's tracking, telemetry and control international contract manager, Tiaan Strydom, told SAinfo.

The Mars Science Laboratory is scheduled to launch between 25 November and 18 December 2011, and to land on Mars at Gale Crater between 6 and 20 August 2012. It will try to perform the first-ever precision landing on Mars. The separation of the Mars Science Laboratory from the Atlas rocket will occur within perfect view of the Hartbeeshoek Telemetry Station for multiple launch opportunities during the launch period.

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