

Pandor has high hopes for SA's radio telescope bid

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SOUTH Africa and its eight African partners are "vigorously" preparing their bid to host the giant Square Kilometre Array (SKA) radio telescope project and are confident of success, says Science and Technology Minister Naledi Pandor.

Speaking at a media briefing before her budget speech in Parliament yesterday, Pandor said a major boost to the African bid against Australia – the winner is due to be announced towards the end of next year – was the fact that the number of radio astronomy facilities was increasing throughout the continent.

This was because local scientists and engineers had developed innovative technologies for existing telecommunication dishes, that have either been decommissioned or were about to be decommissioned, for radio astronomy, Pandor added.

Ghana would soon be converting one of its Vodafone satellite communication dishes into a radio telescope for astronomy, while SA and Mauritius were proposing to launch low-frequency arrays.

"We are very excited at this notion of an African array of telescopes... We remain hopeful that we will emerge victorious when the winning bid (for SKA) is announced next year," she said.

Asked what would happen if Africa's bid was not successful, Pandor replied: "I don't like to hear about not winning."

However, South Africa was also committed to building an "excellent" MeerKAT – the precursor or pathfinder instrument for SKA, that was an extremely powerful radio telescope in its own right.

"(MeerKAT) is the best radio telescope facility of that size ever built, and we will remain a key player in radio astronomy. That's my commitment," she said.

In response to a question about whether the proposed exploration for shale gas in the Karoo using the controversial fracking method might jeopardise the project, deputy minister Derek Hanekom reminded journalists that a fracking moratorium was in place.

However, Pandor had powers to ensure that nothing would be allowed to jeopardise major astronomy projects, he said.

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RECIPE FOR SUCCESS: Science and Technology Minister Naledi Pandor, seen here with Musa Mtileni of the Agricultural Research Council, says the growing number of radio astronomy facilities on the continent should boost SA's bid for the SKA project. PICTURE: ROSS JANSEN