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SA astronomy's future glitters

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Johannesburg - South Africa's achievements in astronomy can help the country overcome its shortage of maths, science and technology skills, said Science Minister Mosibudi Mangena on Monday.

"Our history in astronomical achievements reads like a novel. Our accomplishments in this field rank with the most glittering in the world. And our future in astronomy looks very rosy indeed," read a copy of the speech the minister delivered at South Africa's launch of the International Year of Astronomy (IYA2009), at the Astronomical Observatory in Cape Town.

He said the country was suffering from a crippling shortage of maths, science and technology graduates.

One of the factors contributing to this was ignorance about the role that maths, science and technology graduates could play in society; something South Africa's long history of achievements in astronomy could help address.

Mangena said South Africa's involvement in classical western astronomy formally started in 1685 - 76 years after Galileo made his first observations through a telescope - when a temporary observatory was set up in Cape Town.

South African astronomical observatory

He said in 1751, the Abbe de Lacaille was sent by France's Royal Academy of Sciences to South Africa and set up an observatory in what is now Strand Street in Cape Town.

"From there he charted the positions of almost 10 000 stars, catalogued 42 nebulas, named a number of constellations; and is widely regarded as the person who laid the foundations for modern southern hemisphere astronomy."

Mangena also said the 180th anniversary of the completion of the first stage of the South African astronomical observatory was being celebrated on Monday.

"With this story we can inspire many and fulfil the dreams of the talented. To achieve this, we must all help to spread the story of South Africa's developments in astronomy."

The international celebrations for the year of astronomy - taking place in the year that was also the 400th anniversary of Galileo Galilei's first astronomical observations - were being led by Unesco.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation would support 11 cornerstone projects.

Cape Town's astronomical observatory would be running one of these projects, intended to help developing countries with no observatories or astronomy departments in their universities.

Mangena said events would take place all over the country at observatories, planetariums and science centres to use astronomy to stimulate interest in maths and science.

Africa's technological leader

"To us IYA2009 is not just an occasion for promoting astronomy; it is also an opportunity for stimulating the imaginations of our young and old across the continent."

Mangena said South Africa was Africa's technological leader, and therefore had a responsibility to use its position to the continent's benefit.

Legislation had been passed over the last two years which preserved and protected areas which were uniquely suited for optical and radio astronomy.

He also said South Africa was currently short-listed with Australia to host the Square Kilometre Array Telescope - which would be by far the biggest radio telescope in the world.

"We stand a good chance of winning this bid," said Mangena.

"We have much to celebrate... astronomy in South Africa is thriving. Astronomy can become the catalyst by means of which more Africans can be drawn into the sciences and the maths disciplines."

