South Africa develops a small low earth-orbiting satellite

Ladies and gentlemen, members of the media, welcome!

Tomorrow marks the beginning of the World Space Week that is celebrated internationally from during October of every year. It is the largest annual international space event and in South Africa we have a full programme of activities to cultivate interest in and enthusiasm about the possibilities that Space Science offer.

Space systems are routinely used for telecommunications, broadcasting and various other applications, some of which have become part of commercial business. There is a global recognition that understanding the Earth system is crucial to enhancing human health, safety and welfare, alleviating poverty, protecting the environment, reducing disaster losses, and achieving sustainable development. The combination of data from earth observation satellites and navigation satellites will multiply the number of services associated with space systems. The Department of Science and Technology in close partnership with other government departments, has set itself the task of developing the country's integrated space programme.

It is on this basis that I now announce that our department has initiated a three year integrated capacity building and satellite development project. The project will result in an increase in satellite engineering capacity and the launch of South Africa's second micro satellite. It is a joint initiative between my department, the Stellenbosch University, SunSpace & Information Systems (Pty) Ltd and CSIR's Satellite Application Centre (SAC).

You may remember that South Africa's first satellite, SUNSAT, was developed by Stellenbosch University and successfully launched by the American space agency, Nasa, in February 1999.

The new programme represents an investment of R26 million over the next three years and the programme entails the procurement of a mission ready satellite, research and capacity building. The University will be responsible for managing the project, the associated post-graduate training and scientific research in aspects of satellite engineering and software development. The University has also subcontract services from SunSpace to build the satellite, and SAC for satellite tracking and monitoring operations.

The research component entails the provisioning of postgraduate education at a Masters and Doctoral level in satellite related engineering, software engineering, geography and agriculture remote sensing, over a period of 3 to 4 years.

It is becoming increasingly clear that space assets are critical enablers for societies instead of being a matter of just prestige. In terms of South African needs, this Low Earth Observation (LEO) satellite will serve as a research vehicle that can support:

- Disaster management
- Food security
- Health
- Infrastructure
- Land use
- Safety and security
- Water resource management
- Stimulation of greater innovation through the creation of high value products and services.

The University is currently negotiating with international launch companies for the launch of the satellite which is planned to take place during the second half of 2006.

The Department views this as the beginning of a long-term space programme. This project forms an integral part of our continued activities on a global program called the Group on Earth Observation (GEO). We are further committing ourselves to working closely with other government departments to support the development of a vibrant space industry in South Africa. This program needs to be expanded to bring in other partners, both in academia and industry, with specific opportunities targeted at Black Economic Empowerment.

As part of the activities during the space week, we will be initiating a schools competition to name the satellite. We wish the University and all the partners involved everything of the best with this venture. And remember, the sky is not the limit!

And now I would like to call on the Rector of the University of Stellenbosch, Prof. Chris Brink, to tell you more about the role of the University.

Prof Brink ….