

Brazil Rushing to Join Space Club

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Brazil's space program needs investment of US\$ 200 million per year for the next 10 years. The total needed each year was defined last week during the program revision works by the Brazilian Space Agency.

For 2005, the forecasted budget is of US\$ 100 million, but the quantity may be increased. The launching of the fourth prototype of the satellite launcher rocket VLS-1 is expected to take place in 2006, as well as the first journey to space by Brazilian astronaut Marcos Pontes, trained by NASA.

US\$ 200 million is considered an "ambitious value though feasible" by the AEB (Agência Espacial Brasileira - Brazilian Space Agency) president, Sérgio Gaudenzi.

This year, the space program should count on about US\$ 100 million, but there is the possibility of an increase if the proportion of supplementary contributions is maintained, as was the case in 2004.

Gaudenzi emphasized that, with the budget at the US\$ 200 million mark, "we will try to recover the lost ground so as to effectively enter the space club," and thus reduce the technological distance separating Brazil from the countries capacitated for space exploration.

He pointed out the necessity of concentrating efforts so as to overcome the hardships involved in keeping up with the sector. "If we don't do it now, it won't be necessary later on. We are trying to hold on to the last wagon of the train," he said.

The budget was elaborated considering spatial program targets including, among others, the need for geostationary satellites (used mainly in meteorology and telecommunications), and launching vehicles more potent than the satellite-launching vehicle (VLS-1), which is currently being developed.

One of the main focuses of the revision was the synchronization of activities so that conclusion dates of satellites and launchers, for example, coincide.

"I had only seen a complete and integrated planning like this at the time of creation of the Brazilian Complete Spatial Mission (MECB)," stated brigadier Tiago Ribeiro.

The MECB was the guiding force for the space sector, having forecasted the launching of national satellites from a Brazilian launch base on a rocket manufactured in Brazil.

The minister of Science and Technology, Eduardo Campos, said recently that international technical cooperation is being negotiated for the reconstruction of the launching tower at the space base in the city of Alcântara, in the northeastern state of Maranhão - destroyed in an accident in 2003 -, and launch the fourth prototype of the VLS-1 rocket in 2006.

"Brazil has returned to investing in the program, and is currently at one of the best moments in the last 30 years. In 2005 we will have one of the best years in terms of investments since the program started being implemented in Brazil," stated Campos.

Brazilian Astronaut

Also in 2006, the first Brazilian astronaut will be able to go to space. The expectation is that lieutenant colonel Marcos Pontes, who has been training in the United States since 1998, may be selected for a trip to the international space

station (ISS).

According to Sérgio Gaudenzi, it is possible that Pontes may be included in a Russian mission, although his training is being done by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa).

"This is possible due to the simple fact that the Russians own half the space station. We have two access methods and, from my point of view, any would be very good," stated Pontes during a recent visit to Brazil.

The astronaut, who is an officer of the Brazilian Air Force, stated that if the flight really does take place next year, it will be even more representative, as it will coincide with the release of the VLS-1 prototype and it will be the centenary year of the flight by Santos Dumont, the patron of Brazilian aviation, on the 14 Bis, the aircraft created by him that was the first aircraft in history to take off and land by its own means.

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