PRESS RELEASE

Brazil and China join forces to distribute satellite imagery to Africa at zero cost

Space-based Earth observations become a public good with free access to high-resolution (20m) images

Cape Town, 28 November 2007 – The China Brazil Earth Resources Satellite Programme (CBERS) is launching a new Earth observation service that will provide state-of-the-art images of the planet to end-users throughout Africa – free of charge.

The announcement, made here today during the annual meeting of the Group on Earth Observations (GEO), will empower governments and organizations in Africa to use satellite imagery to monitor and respond to emerging natural disasters, deforestation, desertification and drought, threats to agricultural production and food security, and emerging health risks.

"This new service forms a major contribution to international efforts to build the Global Earth Observation System of Systems. It will strengthen sustainable development and risk management throughout Africa," said Zheng Guoguang, Administrator of the China Meteorological Administration. "It will also advance global cooperation towards achieving the full and open sharing of Earth observation data."

"Providing high-quality Earth observation data at no charge is a crucial first step. To ensure that decision makers in Africa can fully exploit this data, we are also committed to providing image-processing software and on-demand geographic information system (GIS) tools, together with training, to all users who require it," said Gilberto Camara, Director General of Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE).

Breaking the established pattern of single-country ownership of imagining satellites, Brazil and China agreed in 1988 to build, launch and jointly run remote-sensing Earth observation satellites. The CBERS programme (pronounced "syberz") now enables the two countries to produce data and images of their huge national territories cost-effectively.

The third and most recent satellite in the series, CBERS-2B, was launched in China in September 2007 (CBERS-3 and CBERS-4 are to be launched in 2010 and 2012, respectively). CBERS-2B scans the entire planet over a 26-day period with three different imaging cameras. It then transmits multi-spectral, 20-metre-resolution images and other data to three ground receiving stations in China and one in Brazil.

The satellite also carries a transponder for collecting data from automatic weather stations, river gauges and other ground-based observation platforms. This is particularly helpful for obtaining data from remote regions such as rain forests, mountains and lakes.

Brazil and China have signed memoranda of understanding with South Africa, Spain and Italy for using ground stations to download and process CBERS imagery and then distribute it cost-free

throughout Africa via GEONETCast, a data-dissemination system that has been established by GEO, as well as through web-based distribution schemes.

The four African receiving stations are located in the Canary Islands (operated by Spain); Hartebeesthoek, South Africa; and Malindi, Kenya and Matera, Italy, both operated by Italy. The service will be fully operational by early 2008.

“By increasing the number of users and applications benefiting from satellites and other costly equipment, this initiative demonstrates the power of global collaboration on Earth observations. By expanding the market for environmental data and thus their value, CBERS provides a positive signal to potential investors in Earth observations from both the public and private sectors,” said José Achache, Director of the GEO Secretariat.

The first civilian remote-sensing satellite, Landsat-1, was launched by the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in 1972. Today, over 60 Earth observation satellites are scanning the planet with an array of sophisticated monitoring instruments. Together with in-situ and airborne monitors, the world’s growing fleet of observation satellites is revolutionizing our scientific understanding of the Earth system.

The Group on Earth Observations was established in 2005 after the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), the Group of Eight leading industrialized countries (G8) and three ministerial Earth Observation Summits all called for improving existing observation systems. It now boasts over 70 member countries and 46 participating organizations.

GEO is coordinating the construction of a Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS) that will link together diverse monitoring networks, instruments, data bases and models and other decision-support tools.

GEOSS addresses nine priorities of critical importance to the future of the human race. It aims to help us protect ourselves against natural and human-induced disasters, understand the environmental sources of health hazards, manage energy resources, respond to climate change and its impacts, safeguard freshwater resources, improve weather forecasts, manage ecosystems, promote sustainable agriculture, and conserve biodiversity.

Note to journalists: For more information, please contact Michael Williams at the GEO Secretariat +41 22 730 8293 or mwilliams@geosec.org. See also www.earthobservations.org, www.cbers.inpe.br/en/index_en.htm.