

Speech at Paranal Event, 27 October 2013

Tim de Zeeuw, ESO Director General

President Piñera, Chancellor Moreno, Intendente Moro, Under-secretary Bulnes, authorities, colleagues and friends,

Next week it will be 50 years since the Government of Chile and ESO signed an agreement which allowed ESO to build what became the La Silla Observatory with the 3.6-m telescope as centrepiece. This was followed by agreements enabling the construction of the world-leading Paranal Observatory, where we are today, and of ALMA which you inaugurated in March of this year. All these telescopes continue to make major discoveries, provide unparalleled opportunities for astronomers in Chile and in the ESO Member States, and also provide training and employment for many Chileans: administrative staff, engineers, technicians and telescope operators.

It is a fortunate coincidence that almost exactly 50 years to the day from the beginning of this success story we are celebrating an important new milestone. Today's official handover allows ESO to go forward and further expand the Paranal system of telescopes with the Extremely Large Telescope to be built on nearby Armazones. It will have a main mirror of 39 metre diameter and will be the largest and most ambitious project in ground-based astronomy in the world.

This week also marks the 50th anniversary of a remarkable speech by President John F. Kennedy at the [US] National Academy of Sciences. He laid out in clear sentences the key importance of fundamental research, in particular for developed countries, as this ultimately leads to critical progress for, and definition of, our civilization. Unfortunately, this far-sighted view is under pressure in many corners, as the focus in many countries seems to have shifted to research aimed at an immediate commercial application. Today's event demonstrates that President Kennedy's view of the importance of fundamental research and its seminal role for the future is fully understood by you and your government, which strongly supports astronomical research and the associated technology developments, and is fully committed to the protection of the magnificent clear skies of the Atacama Desert. This is a natural and national treasure of deep cultural significance that must be preserved, not only for their value for astronomical research, but also for the appreciation and enjoyment of future generations.

The construction of the ELT on Armazones can now commence. Thirteen of the 14 ESO Member States have committed the required additional funding and Spain is about to join as well. The ratification of the Brazilian accession to ESO is making steady progress, and I am confident that early in 2014 we will construct the road to Armazones and transform the mountain top into the platform that will hold the telescope.

The enormous size of the ELT will allow it to make remarkable astronomical discoveries, not only in the deep Universe but also closer to home. It will enable detailed studies of the atmospheres of planets orbiting nearby stars, and the search for signs of biological activity. Finding evidence of life elsewhere in the Universe would be a remarkable development in the history of our species, and it could happen right here on Armazones. It is indeed an intriguing paradox that the discovery for evidence of extraterrestrial life could take place by observing from one of the most lifeless locations on our own planet!

It is a distinct pleasure to express the sincere thank you from the ESO Member States for this wonderful gift, which bodes so well for the further expansion of our collaboration in astronomy and technology. I also wish to thank the many people who have expertly supported the more formal and legal aspects of this process, always under the principle of a fruitful collaboration between ESO and Chile. The ELT will for sure produce discoveries that we cannot even imagine today, and stunning images that will inspire countless numbers of people around the world, just like those produced by the ESO telescopes over the past 50 years. Mr. President, you can be assured that Chile will be proud of hosting the E-ELT and be associated with it. Thank you.