

**ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF WATER AFFAIRS & FORESTRY,  
RONNIE KASRILS,  
AT A TREE PLANTING IN MEMORY OF THE  
MURDER OF THE GUGULETHU SEVEN  
& AMY BIEHL  
Arbor Day, Gugulethu, 31<sup>st</sup> August 1999**

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I am very honoured to have this opportunity to greet you all. And today I want to extend a special message to all of you who experienced the terrible events that happened here in Gugulethu in the apartheid years. And also, after the disaster that struck early on Sunday morning, the great losses you are suffering now.

I am here today in memory and in tribute of all the people of Gugulethu. I salute the courage you have shown over the years. And I want to express my deep sympathy and concern for the plight of those who have lost their family and friends, their homes and their property in the last few days.

This commemoration has been dedicated to eight people. Eight people who were senselessly slaughtered right here in this historical community.

The first event took place at about 7.30 in the morning on 3 March 1986 when seven young men were shot dead at the corner of NY1 and NY111 and in a field nearby. Their names were Mandla Simon Mxinwa, Zanisile Zenith Mjobo, Zola Alfred Swelani, Godfrey Miya, Christopher Piet, Themba Mlifi and Zabonke John Konile. All seven were shot in the head and suffered numerous other gunshot wounds. Every one here knows the story of how they were set up by askaris and drove into a police trap.

Just seven and a half years later, on 25 August 1993, Amy Elizabeth Biehl drove into Gugulethu to drop off some friends. She was stoned and stabbed to death by a group of youths, some of whom were members returning from a PASO meeting.

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After this killing, Gugulethu convened an historic peace march, joined by people from all over Cape Town and elsewhere.

I want to pay my special respects today to the families of these victims and to their friends and comrades.

What I am going to do here today may seem like a very small thing in the face of the disaster you have experienced here.

I am going to plant a tree.

Every year, once a year, as you probably know, the Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry and a few other people go around planting trees.

It is a nice thing to do. Nobody can argue with that. But why do we do it?

When I became the new Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry a few months ago, I started thinking about what Arbor Day means for our country?

‘Arbor’ means tree in Latin. I found that in a dictionary.

But what does that mean for people on the ground? We don't speak Latin in South Africa. Here in the Cape, we speak Xhosa and English and Afrikaans, not Latin.

So, if we are going to continue to plant trees on Arbor Day, I thought, how can we begin to make it a truly South African day?

Trees are wonderful things. They give us shade. They make our neighbourhoods green. They add beauty and peace to our lives.

And then I remembered a second thing about trees. We need trees.

Trees enrich the soil and supply the world with oxygen. The big forests of the world ~~convert poisonous gasses into the oxygen~~ the rest of us need to live. This is why there is a big debate about the need to save those forests; why we need to be so careful about how, when and where we cut down trees.

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The next thing that I remembered was that many people still use trees and other plants for medicines. The bark and leaves of some trees are used to make things that heal us when we are ill. Many of the things we buy in the pharmacy have parts of plants and trees in them. Things like buchu and eucalyptus and camphor.

And then I discovered a third thing about trees.

I discovered that for many centuries, people have used trees in religious and spiritual ways.

Many years ago in some countries, people planted trees when children were born. They planted them as a celebration of a great event in their lives.

In others places, people planted trees in order to remember someone who had died. As a way to make sure the memory of that person lives forever.

So I realised that a tree can be a very special and remarkable thing. It can make a neighbourhood green and beautiful. It can heal people when they are ill. And it can help us remember a sad or happy event.

Suddenly I began to realise how we can make Arbor Day a special day for all of us here today.

South Africa is a nation that needs trees. In places like this, in the sandy urban deserts that apartheid created, we need to plant trees to help make our neighbourhoods green. We need trees for shade and beauty.

But we need something else in South Africa. The events that happened here, and so many others like them, have shown us that we are a nation that needs to deal with its memories, a nation in need of healing.

Everywhere in South Africa, people have painful memories. Many were cruelly removed from their homes. Some have never had the opportunity to bury their dead. Others are bitter about deaths that occurred as a result of criminal acts of violence. Mothers mourn for their daughters. Husbands for their wives. Brothers for their sisters.

Trees are a symbol of life and growth. When we plant a tree, we know that it will live and grow for a long time. Every year it will renew its leaves. It will give beauty, not only to us, but to those who live after us.

And, in the same way, when we plant a tree in memory of somebody, we know that that memory will live on. We know that, every time we see that tree, it will remind us of the person who died or was hurt. It will remind us that there are ways of turning our grief into something good and strong and beautiful.

Trees can also bring people together. They can be a symbol of reconciliation in communities. In KwaZulu-Natal, for example, people from both sides of the conflict will attend a tree planting reconciliation ceremony.

This year, we have tried to make our Arbor Day celebrations do all these things. We have tried to make it a South Africa day. The events we have arranged are not just so that I can pick up a spade and plant a tree and then go on to my next engagement.

They have been arranged to bring people together in a spirit of renewal, of growth and of reconciliation.

Together ... today ... we will do a thing of great beauty. Every year this tree will put out its leaves and grow a little bigger. It will be a symbol of growth and renewal.

But it will also be a symbol of what we want to remember about the past. It will help us remember what happened in our communities. It will be a memorial to those who suffered, grieved or died.

In Gugulethu, today, we remember the mindless, savage killings of Mandla Simon Mxinwa, Zanisile Zenith Mjobo, Zola Alfred Swelani, Godfrey Miya, Christopher Piet, Themba Mlifi, Zabonke John Konile and Amy Elizabeth Biehl.

In Parliament, tomorrow, President Mbeki and his Cabinet will plant a tree in Tuynhuis gardens in remembrance of the Khoisan people, who were persecuted, hunted, killed and cruelly treated by the early settlers in the Cape.

During this Arbor week, we will also remember those who are most vulnerable in our society. At Kirstenbosch gardens, we will honour those who are old and people with disabilities. In Alexandra, another place where there was great suffering in the past, we will celebrate our hopes for the All Africa Games.

We have many other plans. We will not stop when Arbor Day ends. We will not stop planting trees at the end of the week or at the end of the month.

We believe that South Africans must make 'Arbor Day every day'.

This is why we would like to ask all of you ... we would like to ask everyone in South Africa ... to make trees part of our lives.

We are a nation of survivors. We have survived the terrible years of apartheid. Many of us struggle daily to survive poverty. Many struggle with grief and anger.

And the challenges to survival do not end.

Only two days ago, a terrible disaster struck. Many people here are homeless. Many have lost everything they own. People have been killed and badly hurt.

I would like us to spend a moment quietly remembering all those who have been hurt in the past and those who are hurting now.

I would like us to remember those who are not here because they have been senselessly, sometimes brutally killed, for no reason except that they were there. Just because some angry, sick person decided that they should die.

I would like us to remember that we are all responsible for making sure that, never again, will we allow a terrible tyranny to govern our lives and take away our freedom.

And I would like us to remember, especially today, the many people who lost their lives, their homes and their possessions in the disaster that happened the other night.

Let us spend a moment quietly together thinking about these things.

PAUSE FOR REMEMBERING

Thank you.

This tree that I am about to plant will survive far, far longer than I many of us here.

I would like to think that it will leave a message for all of us, a message we can leave for our children and our children's children.

I would like to believe that it will offer them shelter from the sun.

And that, with the other trees we plant, it will enrich the soil and bring beauty and greenery to this place in the years to come.

And I would like to think also that it will carry a deeper, more important message for all of us here.

That it will remind us the work we must do as a nation of survivors. That it will remind us of the need to bring reconciliation and understanding to our communities.

That it will serve as a signpost that we stood here together today and remembered the many other people who could not be with us today.

And I would like to call on all of you, on all South Africans ...

Plant a tree. And heal our land.

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