

**ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF WATER AFFAIRS & FORESTRY,
RONNIE KASRILS,
AT A TREE PLANTING IN MEMORY OF THOSE
WHO DIED IN THE SEVEN DAY WAR
Arbor Week, Pietermaritzburg, September 1999**

I am very honoured to be here with you today. Honoured and moved to have the opportunity to plant a tree in memory of the many people who died in the bloody conflict we now know as the Seven-Day War.

In those seven terrible days, from 26 – 31 March 1990, 200 residents in the lower valleys of Vulindlela and Edendale, just south of here, were killed. Hundreds of houses were looted and burnt down and some 20 000 people were forced to flee for their lives.

There are many terrible accounts of this week of bloodshed. For example, Mr Edmund Zondi, a resident in the area, told the TRC:

"They killed a woman who had just given birth. They also killed the new-born baby. Even the elderly people who could not run away were killed...."

Father Tim Smith described what he saw:

"In the main building, we discovered the old man, father of the

household, together with several of his grandchildren. He took a long time to come out of his hiding place. He was so shocked. When he did, he told me: *Baziqeda izingane zami* (they have finished off my children) ..."

When I became the new Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry a few months ago, I asked myself, what does Arbor Day mean for our country? What does it mean for us here in KwaZulu-Natal, where so many people have died, where so many have fallen victim to the senseless massacres that took place?

‘Arbor’ means tree in Latin. But what does that mean for people on the ground? For the people of South Africa, for the citizens of KwaZulu-Natal.

How can we begin to make Arbor Day a truly South African day? A day that speaks to us not in Latin, but in a language we can all understand and share.

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

Trees also 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.

I also realised 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

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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 South Africa.

South Africa is a nation that needs trees. In many traditionally white suburbs, there are many trees – avenues of trees, parks and even forests.

In many other parts of our country, people live in urban deserts. We need to plant trees in these areas to help make our neighbourhoods green. We need trees

for shade and beauty. We need to turn our urban deserts into urban forests.

But we need something else in South Africa. We need to remember those we have lost in the sad and terrible years that won us our freedom and democracy.

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. And here, in KwaZulu Natal, where so much remains to be done to achieve the peace we all long for, reconciliation is an ideal towards which we must all continue to strive.

This year, we have tried to make our Arbor Day celebrations do all these things. We have tried to make it a South African 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. We will plant a tree in memory of those who died as a result of the Seven-Day War. We will plant in memory of its many innocent victims. And we will plant too in memory of those who so recently died in KwaMashu.

It is clear that the evil seeds of the conflict in our communities are still ready to sprout. It is clear that these alien invaders will take root if we do not bring an end to the terrible violence that tears our communities apart.

It is our responsibility, as survivors, to work towards the peace and reconciliation we so badly need. Let this little tree symbolise our commitment to building this peace; to forging this reconciliation between those who still use violence to achieve their ends.

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.

This week, all over the country, we have been planting trees in memory of our past.

In Parliament, President Mbeki and his Cabinet planted 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.

On Wednesday, at Kirstenbosch gardens in Cape Town, we will remember those who are most vulnerable in our society.

In Soweto, yesterday, I called on the people to plant a forest of trees. To plant trees under which children can play, people can sit. Trees that bring shade and peace and beauty to people's lives.

This is why we would like to ask all of you ... why we would like to ask everyone in South Africa ... to make trees part of our lives. Not just during Arbor Week. Not just today. But every day.

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. Many of us still live in fear of violence and death.

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 children and their families in the great struggle that brought us where we are today.

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.

And, in this spirit of growth, of renewal and commemoration, I would like to call on all of you, on all South Africans ...

Plant a tree. And heal our land.

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