

**SPEECH BY THE MINISTER OF WATER AFFAIRS AND FORESTRY,  
RONNIE KASRILS ON BEHALF OF THE MINISTER OF PROVINCIAL  
AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

**SNAP DEBATE ON DISASTER MANAGEMENT**

**25 January, 2000**

Disasters show us nature at its most violent and unforgiving; but they often bring out the best in people.

A few days ago, the citizens of this province experienced some of the most frightening fires in Cape history. It was a combination of factors. Flames devoured plants, fuelled by high-risk invading alien vegetation. Very low rainfall had meant that the veld was unusually dry. A howling South-Easter wind drove the fire further and further across the Peninsula, making it almost impossible to control. Temperatures rose to over 40 degrees. Homes were destroyed. and a pall of smoke hung over the area, as though in mourning for the terrible destruction wreaked by the fire. It looked as though a nuclear bomb had been dropped.

Throughout those ghastly days, people from all backgrounds came out into the stifling heat to help. Emergency services, reinforced by their colleagues in other provinces. Ministers, MECs and local government officials. Welfare institutions and NGOs. The SAPS and the SANDF. And, at their side, ordinary civilian volunteers worked tirelessly in the battle to quench the fires. (The details of the remarkable way national, provincial and local government responded are documented. The report is available to anyone who wishes to have a look at it).

Some worked for days without sleep. Others joined them when they heard how exhausted the fire fighters were. Still others brought food and provided shelter. And all over the country, people stared aghast at their television screens, horrified at the spectre of a fire that, at times, seemed as though it was all-engulfing.

For many, of course, the fire is not over. The damage it has caused will cost millions of rands to replace. Homes have been destroyed, wild life killed and vegetation razed. The trauma of this fire will live on for a long time.

When all is said and done, however well we prepare, disasters will happen.

We have witnessed several disasters over the past few months. We all remember the freak storm that devastated Manenberg and Gugulethu in August last year.

Last December, torrential rains caused flooding all over the country. Some of the most devastating were in Durban, Pinetown and the surrounding areas, where seventeen people lost their lives and many other were injured. In the Northern Province, several rural villages were cut off after bridges were swept away, a number of houses collapsed, roads were closed and three people were reported drowned. In the Eastern Cape rooftops were ripped off by strong winds, homes damaged and trees uprooted in the Umtata area.

Inevitably, the costs in human life, injuries and loss of property are the legacy of these disasters. And, although nature is indiscriminate in its fury, it is usually the poor and the dispossessed who, simply by virtue of their precarious existence, suffer the most damage.

The question is, what can we, as government, do to reduce our vulnerability to the effects of natural disasters. In fact it is pertinent to question how “natural” some of our “natural disasters” really are, and to concede that many of the problems lie in the inequities of the past - based on poverty and malpractice.

In Pinetown, for example, dwellings built by the poor on the banks of the river were swept away in the floods, and not for the first time. People must not be allowed to put themselves at risk by building in flood-prone areas, such as river

banks, high slopes and flood plains. Their fate reflects a need to plan properly, to enforce appropriate options and to seek viable alternatives. This is an issue for local government to enforce.

Similarly, government has developed a major focus on land-use practices. Poor land-use practices over decades have increased the intensity of almost every flood we have witnessed. Over-grazing, erosion, invading alien plants, destruction of wetlands, planting too close to banks, or planting on too steep slopes, poor road alignment and maintenance – these are all major contributing factors in the floods that we have to endure. The solution is being provided by Government's planning for education, for the enforcement of wise legislation, for giving people viable choices and through partnerships.

In looking at disaster management, we must also consider possible global influences. We recall the threat of El Nino two years ago, the sea temperature phenomenon that threatened drought in our part of the world. Although the disaster did not materialise, the decision to invest against risk was amongst the kinds of difficult decisions we will continue to have to make. The crucial decision is always the extent to which we commit scarce resources to countering a perceived threat, and to what extent we accept a level of risk.

Individuals have choices too. The recent fires that swept through the Western Cape showed that many property-owners were either ignorant of the risks they faced, or were prepared to take the risks.

For some time now, government has focused its concern on the problems caused by alien vegetation, often in the face of great opposition from property owners and sections of the public. Perhaps the lesson has now been learnt.

We need to clear all invading alien plants.

We need to ensure that effective fire-breaks are in place in terms of the National

Forest and Veld Fires Act of 1988, and undertake ecologically sound block-burning of the natural vegetation. We are investigating how those fire-breaks were organized and maintained in the Cape Peninsula.

The Act is clear:

"Every owner on whose land a veldfire may start or burn must prepare and maintain a firebreak between his or her land and any adjoining land.

Further:

It must be wide enough and long enough to have a reasonable chance of preventing a veldfire from spreading to or from neighbouring land ... with due regard to the weather, climate, terrain and vegetation.

Those living next to fire-prone vegetation need to fire-proof their dwellings.

We need to look at zoning and property development, and the impacts that our planning decisions have on the potential damage during disasters.

The insurance industry needs to re-assess fire risk in such circumstances, and the way in which the risk is borne by those with insurance. After all, a shift of a few degrees in the wind can cost the insurance industry billions of rands. They must recognise the need to protect their stakeholders' investments.

Government, too, has acted quickly to put more measures in place. Within a matter of days of the fire, we were able to announce that our *Working for Water* programme would put R2,5 million into countering the severe problem of re-growth of these unwanted weeds that are "born to burn". Other measures are under discussion and will be announced soon.

Mitigation is one side of the story. The other relates to planning and foresight.

As Government, we must continue to take all steps to ensure that we are properly prepared at all times. We need to be able to react fast when disaster strikes, in order to minimise the damage that may be caused. In this respect, we must commend the many people from the different structures of government who moved into action with speed and efficiency. When it became clear that reinforcements were needed during the fire, Minister Mufamadi arranged for the deployment of emergency services from Gauteng. They flew down to fight side by side with their Cape colleagues. This kind of co-operation and teamwork is essential in any disaster.

One of the ways of ensuring an efficient and effective response is through co-ordinated preparations and planning. The establishment of the National Disaster Management Centre to deal with the possible threat of the millennium bug is a case in point. During elections, joint operational centres were set up in advance, in case problems developed. Such centralised structures make it easier to mobilise forces when disasters occur. One of the problems in the Western Cape has been the multiple responsibility by a variety of structures and services, militating against the optimum co-ordination of effective actions. Thankfully, this will now change with the establishment of the new Uni-City metros, a fundamental aspect of this Government's policy. Co-ordination, always, is the key to successful management, and will help us to overcome some of the initial management problems that surfaced during the Peninsula fires.

In addition, we will be looking in greater depth at the underlying reasons for the severity of this fire and the lessons that can be learned for fire management. We shall be bringing in international experts to help us to do this and ensure that the focus is on fire protection and not on turf protection.

The success of the National Disaster Management Centre in particular has persuaded government of the good sense of creating a permanent disaster management centre. This is the purpose of the Disaster Management Bill, gazetted by the Minister of Provincial and Local Government four days ago. The Bill

departs from the previous disaster management strategy that focussed mainly on response, recover and relief ... to preparedness and mitigation of the consequences of disasters.

Good disaster management depends on co-ordinating the efforts of all three spheres of government, the emergency services and other organisations. It requires teamwork; a partnership committed to common goals. The National Disaster Management Centre will concentrate on strengthening co-ordination and our ability to manage disasters, as well as taking steps to reduce community vulnerability to their effects.

We are, all of us, horrified by the random cruelty of natural disasters. And these days, with our instant access to world news, we sometimes seem to share in the terrifying events that take place all over the world. Our planet experiences earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions and other horrors which we see on our TV screens and newspapers, and hear of on the radio, and our hearts go out to those whose lives, families, homes and communities are devastated.

There is often little that we can do to help, although sometimes we are able to provide relief or assistance. What we can do is profit from each others experiences and learn to plan, to prepare and to act with speed and efficacy when disasters occur. We can find ways to prevent unnecessary damage and suffering. And we can constantly improve on the way we respond when the first flare goes up.

It is this that my Government has committed itself to do, is determined to do, and to improve upon and perfect as far as is humanly possible. On behalf of President Mbeki's Government, I wish to express our Heartfelt sympathy to all those who have suffered in these tragic disasters..