

**SPEECH BY THE MINISTER OF WATER AFFAIRS AND FORESTRY,
MR RONNIE KASRILS, DURING THE PRESIDENT'S DEBATE**

14 February 2001

Check against Delivery

Madam Speaker

Mr President

Honourable Members

“Gradually, step by step, our country proceeds further away from its painful past. We, its citizens, who are very close to the coalface of change may not easily see the steady transformation that informs all aspects of our national life.”

Thus began President Mbeki’s address to this House last Friday.

In paying tribute to all our people, black and white who have contributed to this progress, the President has called to all our people across the colour line to dedicate this year to building unity in action for change.

I would like to address some aspects of this change, and of the remarkable level of delivery that goes with it. Yes, sometimes we at the coalface do not easily see the progress, although too often some are transfixed by the problems and obstacles – and maybe don’t see further than the nose on their face.

The changes in our country in under seven years are impressive. The President has referred to the figures in housing, electricity connections, clean water delivery, land distribution and so on. He has also referred to the daunting backlog of poverty. He has referred to cholera and the need for a more vigorous extension of the sanitation system.

One is reminded of the long road of development in Europe and of their struggle to eliminate cholera and other disease.

In 1850 the cholera epidemic in London led to the realisation by the Victoria authorities of the need for water and sanitation services to eradicate such disease.

It took them many years – as it did in other European countries – before they had established basic services for their people and the necessary local government structures to ensure the sustainable maintenance and management of the system.

Even 50 years later, on the eve of the Anglo-Boer war, the British military authorities were alarmed at stunted, ill-nourished recruits, they were depending on. It took another 50 years, to post-war Europe for the modern basic services to emerge in most parts of that continent.

Madam Speaker, we are not going to take that long. The President's speech shows his government's commitment to speed up delivery.

What I am alluding to is that by comparison with, say Britain of the mid-nineteenth century, the richest and most powerful power of its time, our rate of progress is indeed phenomenal.

Since 1995 when our community water service programme began we have delivered safe water to almost seven million of our rural people. There are another seven million to reach!

When one looks at the extent of poverty and underdevelopment in the rural areas, and indeed our urban townships and informal settlements, the vast differences in wealth clearly demonstrates that we are a country of rich and poor.

The President's speech illustrated government's offensive against rural and urban poverty through its integrated rural development strategy and its urban renewal programme.

In practice this means, as the President once stated, that when a clinic or school is built, roads, water and electricity will be simultaneously provided.

The socio-economic benefits of providing affordable basic services are well recognised. The provision of water supply and sanitation in particular makes a direct contribution to the health and well being of the poor. It has a direct impact on women who remain mainly responsible for carrying water and using it to maintain a clean and healthy home.

We have seen that the introduction of charges for pure water at even a low rate has resulted in communities resorting to unsafe source. For these reasons the government has decided to ensure that poor households are given a basic supply of water free of charge.

Based on the policy framework for delivery, the Cabinet last month approved a programme of implementation of 6000 litres of safe water per household per month.

The date set for implementing the free minimum basic water policy by local government structures is 1 July 2001. I need to stress that the current payment arrangements remain in place until local councils inform consumers of the specific date of implementation in specific areas.

Free basic water is to be funded using a combination of the equitable share of revenue of local government and internal cross-subsidies from appropriately structured water tariffs in a manner which best reflects the specific situation in the respective local government area.

The implementation programme has three components:

- The preparation of detailed guidelines for local government;
- The establishment of dedicated support teams for local government; and
- The establishment of mechanisms to finance and implement the required metering and billing of water supplies.

The President indicated in his speech that this year will see an unprecedented acceleration of the delivery of water and sanitation. In a clear vote of confidence in the South African Government, the European Union has contributed R500-million grant over the next three years for the water and sanitation services.

The President made special reference in his speech to the provision of sanitation which has gone much slower than what we would have liked. Recent studies indicate that 3,5 million mainly rural households have no access to sanitation, i.e. 21 million people.

Part of the problem in delivering sanitation has been the current demand-led approach, which is dependent on individual households requesting a R600 grant to build latrines. Although this approach is based on international best practice, we have found the going very slow and only since the cholera outbreak has the demand increased. It is for this reason that an urgent review of the Government's sanitation policy is underway and we are committed to focusing far more resources to accelerate the delivery of sanitation.

The Cabinet has approved an integrated inter-departmental approach to sanitation linking water supply, housing, local government, health and education.

Until now, the sanitation has been supplied by six government departments.

In terms of the Cabinet decision, the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry will lead the inter-departmental approach within the framework of the Municipal Infrastructure program.

The need for joint provision of services has been reinforced by the tragedy of the cholera outbreak. Since 1994 we have provided 1,2 million people in KwaZulu/Natal with access to safe water. It goes without saying that without these people having been given water and sanitation, the epidemic would have been much worse.

Over the next three years, the government will spend R650-million on providing water and sanitation to KwaZulu/Natal alone.

Against this background, it is essential to understand that the Government has mobilised its resources to contain the epidemic as soon as the first cases were reported in KwaZulu/Natal.

I wish to wholeheartedly congratulate the Minister and the Department of Health on the handling of the epidemic. It is largely due to their efforts that the fatality rate in South Africa – as pointed out by the World Health Organisation – is well below the international fatality rate in cholera epidemics.

The Government regards the epidemic as a serious matter and is applying all the measures it would in the event of a disaster precisely to avoid it from becoming a national disaster. In order to achieve this goal, the National Disaster Management Centre has been mobilised in the Government's fight against the epidemic.

The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry recognises that the provision of adequate water and sanitation is one of the most critical components in wiping out cholera which is endemic in KwaZulu/Natal.

It is only through working together – unity in action – that we understand concerns raised by our critics. Two weeks ago, the columnist Max du Preez made some useful suggestions which we have already taken on board.

With the assistance of the Ministry of Land Affairs and Agriculture and General Constand Viljoen, contact has been made with Agri South Africa. In the true spirit of unity in action, they are ready to help the government combating the cholera epidemic by distributing bleach and educational health material, setting up temporary water tanks and providing emergency water.

Also in the spirit of unity in action we pay tribute to Charl Senekal from Mkhuze, who has spent R20-million to provide not only irrigation for his sugar estate but also life-giving water to 190 000 people living in Mkhuze and the Bethesda Hospital at Umbombo.

We thank the heroic doctors and health workers for their selfless work around the clock to cholera victims. We are encouraged by the many people in KwaZulu/Natal who are working with my department in erecting pit latrines – 9000 in 9 weeks serving 100,000 people and another 100,000 learners at 200 schools.

As the President pointed out, the success of the government's plan of action will also depend on the extent to which people can be mobilised so that they become active participants in the upliftment of their own communities.

Let us reiterate the President's call for all South Africans to dedicate this year to building unity in action for change. That is the way to bridge the rural divide and forge the unity of all our people.