

LAUNCH OF OPERATION VUSELELA

Youngsfield, Cape Town
14h00, Thursday 27 March 2003

ADDRESS BY MINISTER RONNIE KASRILS, M.P. Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry

Comrade Deputy Minister Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, General Nqose, distinguished guests, Comrades, Ladies and Gentlemen: Molweni, Dumela, goei middag, good afternoon.

It gives me particular pleasure to be here with you today. As a person who spent much of his adult life in fighting for democracy in our country, as a proud military veteran, this programme has a special meaning for me. As Comrade Nozizwe has reminded us, we owe a great deal to the women and men who risked their lives to bring peace, justice and democracy to our country. One of the ways in which we can honour these contributions is to make special efforts to ensure that we seek to find opportunities for our military veterans in our developmental programmes.

The *Working for Water* programme has pioneered a number of initiatives that reach out to redress past injustices. Late last year we signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the South African Federal Council on Disability, initiated through the efforts of the *Working for Water* programme to honour its commitment to the training and provision of employment for the disabled. The programme also has a partnership of several years now, where it and NICRO have joined forces to seek to find opportunities for the training and provision of employment for former inmates.

These are still developing partnerships, but the programme can point to a consistent commitment to still other targeting of the marginalized, in its constantly employing over 50% of its workforce who are women.

It is with this commitment to social justice in our country, that the *Working for Water* programme has sought to ensure that a portion of the work opportunities go to military veterans. *Working for Water* currently has some 20,000 people in the field, and I am proud to know that within these will be my comrades in arms.

I want to emphasize the fact that *Working for Water* not only provides training and employment opportunities for the poorest of the poor and the most marginalized in our country, but it also prevents existing jobs and products being lost through the impacts of invading alien plants.

Invading alien plants are species that have been introduced into our country, and spread out of control. Some of them have been introduced by accident, but most have been introduced because they offer some value as a forestry or

similar crop (such as pines and gums), or because they are pretty (ornamental plants like the *Oleander* and pom pom weed).

There impacts can be devastating. As the name *Working for Water* implies, some of these plants do pose a massive threat to our water security. They use more water than the plants they displace, and we simply cannot afford to waste water on plants that are not productively used.

But they also have a major impact on our biological diversity – the variety of plants and animals that make up our life-support systems. Many people regard this as the single biggest long-term threat of invading alien plants. Not only do we face driving many of our indigenous species into extinction, but we also can threaten the ecological integrity of natural systems upon which we all ultimately depend.

Invading alien plants don't stop there. They pose a major risk to the productive potential of land. In many parts of the eastern side of our country, a South American weed, called the triffid weed (*Chromolaena odorata*), is swamping land that previously sustained productive practices. I need not remind you, too, that it is often the poor who are least capable of withstanding these invasions, and there are tragic stories of families who have been driven off of their land through this aggressive invader.

And then there are the fires that are so often associated with invading alien plants. Here in Cape Town, the Santam/Cape Argus *Ukuvuka* Campaign was a response to the massive fires that were fuelled by invading alien plants along the Table Mountain chain. It was instructive to note that every single house that burned down in that fire (and in subsequent wild fires around Cape Town) was surrounded by invading alien plants.

They have many other negative impacts, such as soil erosion and water quality, but the common denominator is always the impact on our quality of life, and the concept of sustainable development.

Comrades, this is a new war ... a war driven to safeguard the lives of our people. I have often spoken about the risk of having people think of xenophobia, when talking of invading alien plants. Let it be said that invading alien plants do not respect political boundaries. The triffid weed of which I spoke, is a major threat to the economic future of Swaziland, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and many other African countries. In the dry west, the mesquite (*Prosopis* species) are a threat to South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and other drier parts of our continent.

It is therefore of great satisfaction to know that our military veterans are again taking up arms – arms of a different kind – to wage war on behalf of the people of South Africa and our comrades to the north. *Operation Vuselela* has the potential to be a wonderful role-model for all Government Departments, as the Department of Defence joins hands with my Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, Minister Moosa's Department of Environmental

Affairs and Tourism, and Minister Thoko Didiza's Department of Agriculture, to ensure that its land is cleared on invading alien plants – and is kept clear.

I would like to thank Deputy Minister Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, who has done so much to ensure that this programme has come to be realized. I thank, too, the military veterans for their support and commitment, and, of course, the *Working for Water* programme. I shall watch the progress of Operation Vuselela with great interest, for as a former Deputy Minister of Defence to my successor, this programme embraces so much of what we want to see being achieved in this portfolio – the active deployment of military veterans, armed with “ploughs”, to further serve their nation. I wish you all every success. END.