

Santam Cape Argus Ukuvuka Operation Firestop Campaign

Third Anniversary event Friday 21 February 2003

Keynote Address by Minister Ronnie Kasrils

Using disasters to power development opportunities

We stand in a place far removed from the mountains where the fierce flames in January 2000 led to the start of the Santam Cape Argus Ukuvuka Operation Firestop Campaign. The crisis of fire all along the mountains was inescapably in the face of every viewer. It demanded attention. It could not be ignored. It was relatively easy to use this disaster to mobilise action from the 3 spheres of government and the private sector.

The on-going fires in the Cape Flats were a different story. Repeated fire incidents trap the most vulnerable citizens in the downward spiral of poverty. But these fires are far less visible and demanding of the attention that they so desperately need. It was therefore appropriate to insist that these much more easily overlooked fires in informal settlements should be part of this Campaign that started through the concern with the fires in the mountain. I acknowledge the vision and determination of the then Mayor of Cape Town, Nomaindia Mfeketo, and some of her fellow councillors to include Langa's Joe Slovo in a campaign to combat uncontrolled fires on the Cape Peninsula.

Before my budget speech in May 2001 I came to Joe Slovo to participate in a fire fighting demonstration and training session. This was part of an initiative to empower individual residents to take some control of their lives by seeing how the very swift co-operative effort (that you have seen in the earlier pictures) could control fire. Admirable as this is, on its own, it is not enough to fight the enemy of raging fire fanned by the Cape winds.

We stood close to the powerlines that you have seen as you drove to this event. A shack had been constructed to simulate the conditions in which fire takes a hold, but for the rest, the area under the powerlines was clear of structures. It is remarkable that some 20 months later, this "prime real estate" for people desperate to be as close as possible to where they can generate some economic activity, is still clear of dwellings. This is not a phenomenon that is common as Eskom will freely

tell you. It is an insight into the very constructive relationship that the City of Cape Town has built through its liaison structures with the community.

This close liaison with community has been crucial in the success of the approach to fire mitigation in Joe Slovo. Clearly the approximately 4000 people left homeless after the November 2000 fire that President Mbeki declared a national disaster, had great incentive to re-build their homes in a way that might reduce their vulnerability to fire. The fact that the remaining three quarters of Joe Slovo residents voluntarily moved is remarkable. It shows that the community saw the City and Ukuvuka's pilot as successful and that the community felt that it had been properly consulted. I congratulate the City and all others involved on this people-centred approach.

The development opportunity

Development has many faces. The one that usually comes to mind is employment. At last year's anniversary event, we looked at the number of income generating opportunities created in the initiative facilitated by Ukuvuka in the Noordhoek wetlands. That successful training and employment creation venture was funded by the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism' Working for Wetlands. I would like to acknowledge the work and contribution of DEAT's Minister, Mohammed Valli Moosa, whose collaboration and vision also contributed to the creation of Ukuvuka.

This year we look at a different face of development. Poverty gives rise to appalling vulnerability. Fire and flood erode whatever resources a poor family has managed to accumulate. We have seen this in the pictures. The extent to which people can be made less vulnerable is an important contribution to development. This is what has happened in Joe Slovo.

The structural intervention of making tracks around blocks of homes coupled with the addition of fire hydrants has significantly reduced the loss of homes and so it has significantly reduced vulnerability. In this way the work in Joe Slovo has materially contributed to development.

As excited as we are about the success of the initiatives here in Langa, we know that physical interventions alone are not sustainable. Ultimately people have to change behaviour too. I am delighted to hear that Ukuvuka will continue to innovate and to test ways to lessen vulnerability and to build resilience through behaviour change. A pilot project has been undertaken in another

fire-prone informal settlement in Red Hill. We look forward to hearing the progress of this further pilot.

The power of partnerships of Joe Slovo

The remarkable results that we have heard about today would not have been possible without collaboration and partnerships. Through the range of partnerships, Langa's Joe Slovo informal settlement is transforming. Loss of dwellings to fire have decreased significantly. The land under the powerlines is transforming from an unsanitary rubbish tip into an amenity wanted by the members of the community. People are learning greening skills. There is progress. We are not naïve enough to think that this has largely addressed the problem of fire in the area and the underlying social and economic problems. There are still great challenges but what has been demonstrated here gives hope that the chronic crisis of fire in informal settlements can be addressed.

Reflecting on where the opportunity provided by crisis can take you

Three years ago when we gathered after the blazing fires in the Peninsula, we saw that for all the "bad" of the crisis there was also potential good. We look back now on what has happened.

At a time when we have been hearing of huge fires in Australia we recognise that the Peninsula has been remarkably free of uncontrolled fires. Since the 2000 fires, one house has burned to the ground and another lost its roof. Both were surrounded by invading alien plants.

In the past, the Peninsula has suffered the after-effects of fire such as mud slides and slope slippage. Houses have been lost, roads and services severely damaged and the normal functioning of the City disrupted. It is worth noting that the rehabilitation initiatives initiated by the City and funded by Ukuvuka have meant that there have been no repeats of these costly incidents.

I think that we truly need to celebrate what has been delivered on the ground so far. I know that the Ukuvuka team and the governance structures are impatient to complete delivery on all the 10 objectives of the original business plan. I understand their urgency but for one morning in the year let us celebrate what has been done.

I would particularly like to acknowledge all the partners – local, provincial and national government, civil society and the private sector. Very particular acknowledgement goes to the sponsors: the City of Cape Town, Santam, Total, WWF's Green Trust made possible by Nedbank. Your initial faith and your on-going funding have made possible the successes that we are celebrating today. We did not even begin to suspect at that first meeting convened after the fires that we could have traveled this road. It made the support of our sponsors, especially in the private sector, even more admirable.

Thank you to all of you who have come to share this time of reflection and celebration.

Phambili to meeting the next challenges in creating areas of our country that are free from the fear of fire.