

Address at the Presidential Reconstruction Programme Launch

Kruger National Park 10 April 2001

Master of Ceremonies,
Honourable Ministers,
Your Excellency, Ambassador Abdullah Al Suwaidi,
Mr Mavuso Msimang and leaders of the Kruger National Park;
Our community leaders, Ms Elizabeth Manzini and Siphon Mpangane,
Distinguished Guests,
Comrades, Ladies and Gentlemen:

As you will all recall, during February 2000, exceptionally heavy rainfalls caused by tropical cyclones Eline and Gloria moved from east to west over the sub continent and resulted in flooding that was to prove disastrous and life-threatening for the people of these regions.

The floods that followed were to affect our people in the Northern Province, Mpumalanga, Kwa-Zulu Natal and the Eastern Cape, as well as our brothers and sisters in the adjacent countries of Botswana, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

These floods severely disrupted the lives and livelihoods of the people of these regions of Southern Africa, taking lives, leaving almost 100 000 people homeless, with provincial roads, bridges, agricultural systems, schools, clinics and other infrastructure damaged and destroyed.

Unfortunately, the floods did not spare this national and international resource, the Kruger National Park, and the people who live in the environs of the Park, including the poor who are least equipped to withstand the impact of natural disasters.

In the light of the challenge we faced, the national government established an Emergency Reconstruction Committee to oversee our reconstruction programme, with Ministers Stella Sigcau and Dullah Omar as the Chair and Deputy Chair respectively.

We asked Minister Lindiwe Sisulu, then Deputy Minister of Home Affairs, to lead the Command Centre that would be directly responsible for the implementation of this programme.

It was also decided that because of the extreme priority that attached to some of the projects, these would be designated as Presidential Projects to expedite the process of reconstruction. The Kruger National Park and its environs were designated as such a Presidential Reconstruction Project.

I am very pleased that we had the opportunity today to visit the Kruger Park and the adjacent area to see the progress that has been made in wiping out the damage caused by last year's floods.

What we saw this morning of the advances that have been made has been most inspiring.

It must surely be a matter of national pride and joy that the facilities within the Park have now been restored and greatly improved, for the benefit of the large numbers of our people and foreign guests who visit the Kruger Park every year.

I was pleased that last night I had the opportunity to experience the comfort of an overnight stay at one of the renovated lodges and can attest that, indeed, the Park is open for business.

I am particularly happy that the poor rural communities around the Park can now boast of the new infrastructure that has been put in place to replace and upgrade what they lost. This constitutes a

concrete expression of the progress our country is making towards the building of a people centred society and the achievement of the goal of a better life for all.

Accordingly, on behalf of our government and people, I would like to extend our thanks to our Ministers and to Public Works and other government departments for the sterling work they have done. I would also like to convey the apologies to this gathering of Minister Sigcau, who had to be in the Eastern Cape and Minister Sisulu, who is out of the country on a government mission.

The work of reconstruction has been a collective effort. We are privileged to have this opportunity to thank everybody else who has been involved in this work of reconstruction and development. These include people from the Command Centre to the leadership of our National Parks and the Management of the Park, other parastatal organisations, the National Defence Force, Government and people of the United Arab Emirates, the communities near the Park, the private sector and the workers of our country.

In particular, I would like to recognise and welcome H.E. Ambassador Abdullah Al Suwaidi of the United Arab Emirates. He is here to celebrate the common success we have achieved because of the generous commitment made by the President of the United Arab Emirates, His Highness Sheik Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, to help to fund this particular Presidential Reconstruction Project.

I would also like to request him to convey our immense gratitude and appreciation to His Highness Sheik Zayed for this act of human solidarity which symbolises and cements the excellent relations that exist between our two countries and peoples.

The bridging finance provided by the Development Bank of Southern Africa was also an important and timely contribution.

I am aware and grateful that Eskom and its subsidiary Eskom Enterprises, through Roshcon, have done good work in the reconstructing of schools, roads other amenities and the building of emergency shelters.

The contribution of other state-owned enterprises cannot be ignored. SANRAL and SANDF have also seen to the reconstruction of roads and shelters, while Transnet, the CSIR and the HSRC have provided logistical and other support.

Our thanks also go to Mr Colin Matjila, CEO at the Command Centre and Mr Mavuso Msimang, head of South African National Parks and their colleagues who have ensured that the work that has been done was in fact done.

The reconstruction of the Kruger National Park must be located within the larger picture of what we are trying to achieve in our region and country.

We meet today in the Kruger National Park, one of our foremost tourist attractions, in the midst of great natural beauty, to pledge our commitment to the people who live in this area as well as to the upkeep and improvement of this national asset.

This includes the preservation and protection of the wild life, the vegetation and the water resources of the Park. This is both important in itself and a key asset must benefit our people and the peoples of the world.

The work that has been done means that we have improved our tourism infrastructure and the quality of our park facilities, so that we ensure that the Kruger National Park remains the preferred destination for the people of the world who visit our country for rest and recreation.

The multiplier effect this has, together with new initiatives by National Parks to create public-private partnerships, will also mean increased possibilities of private sector investment, the maintenance of existing employment and the creation of new job opportunities both within and outside the Kruger Park.

By doing all this, we will have taken yet other steps towards ending the poverty that continues to afflict millions of our people and sustain the advance towards the goal of a prosperous society.

At the same time, South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe have united in a joint initiative that will result in a large Transfrontier Park that will enable all of us to share the benefits of eco-tourism in the areas around our common borders.

As you know, the Kruger National Park will be part of the transfrontier initiative.

These initiatives are also critically important to the preservation of our national heritage and the people's heritage throughout our region for the benefit of future generations who must be able to walk this and other nature parks with wonder and with a deep love for nature and the land of their birth.

Some time ago, the Hon Mohamed Valli Moosa, Minister of the Environment and Tourism, lent me a book written by John Reader entitled *Africa: A Biography of the Continent*.

In this interesting work, the author says of a place that is not far from here, that:

"The Barberton Mountain Land is built of layers of sediment that were eroded from a pre-existing landscape and deposited in a marine basin, where they eventually accumulated to a thickness of more than five kilometres. In its original state, around 3.6 billion years ago, they probably covered nearly 20,000 square kilometres.... Eventually the basin was squashed into about one-third of the area it had originally occupied, and massive high mountains were created as the rock layers were folded and forced upward. Since then erosion has stripped them down. In some places the ancient oceanic deposits have gone completely.

"In other places the older deposits remain; the oldest of all are found in a 3.6 billion-year-old geological formation known as the Fig Tree Group, whose most distinctive component is a heavy dense black chert. Chert is a kind of flint, formed from the silica-rich ooze that collected on the floor of the ancient basin.... Some of the earliest-known forms of life evolved in the waters above; as they died, the remains of these microscopic organisms sank to the bottom and were fossilised as the ooze was transformed to chert. They are preserved there still - the earliest-known evidence of life on Earth, 3.6 billion years old, in Africa.....

"The fossils preserved in the 3.6 billion-year-old cherts of the Fig Tree formation are the relics of single-cell bacteria. They comprise the earliest-known evidence of life on Earth, marking the transition from a sterile to an ultimately fertile world." (*Penguin Books, London 1998, pp. 17-19*)

Thus does Reader draw our attention to our ancient past, to a discovery that this part of our country is the home of the earliest known life on earth. From this single-cell bacteria, found in Barberton, after many evolutionary processes, emerged other living organisms, including humanity itself.

In fact, throughout our country, in places like Sterkfontein, Taung, Makapansgat, the Karoo, Eastern and Western Cape Coasts and the Northern Province, among others, there is to be found evidence of the evolution of both life and human life through the millennia.

It is not surprising, therefore, that year after year, humanity from across the globe returns to this important place of the evolution of life and humanity, including this part of our country, the Kruger National Park.

From the dim and distant origins of life in Barberton, to the earliest human life in Sterkfontein and Taung, through all the various places at which life has evolved on Earth, to this living centre that today reconnects humanity to its place of birth, we, the inheritors of this rich legacy, must do our utmost to preserve a world in which humanity is at one with nature.

In a humble and concrete way, the work that has been and will be done here will help us realise this vision. We thank everybody who works in and for our National Parks, including that dedicated activist, Dr Anton Rupert, for his promotion of Peace Parks, and wish them well as they carry out their critically important work.

I thank you.