

**Address at the South Africa National Day**  
**Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry**  
**Expo Zaragoza, Zaragoza, Spain**  
**5 August 2008**

Director of Expo Zaragoza (the Minister in the Presidency)  
Minister of Water Affairs  
Commissioners  
Ambassadors and Diplomats  
Government officials  
Ladies and Gentleman

It is a great honour for South Africa to be part of Expo Zaragoza, an important global event that is focusing attention on water and sustainable development. I want to express our gratitude to the Spanish Government for inviting us to be part of this Expo and to thank you all for joining us at our Expo National Day.

From our interaction here at Expo Zaragoza we hope to:

- Strengthen strategic bilateral relations between South Africa and Spain, which has grown considerably over the years.
- Foster trade and industry development between the two countries and also the rest of the participating countries. Spain is one of South Africa's largest trading partners and I am informed that already as a result of our interaction with the organisers of Expo Zaragoza, Spanish companies visited South Africa and in a few weeks time a delegation of South African companies will be coming to the Expo.
- Showcase South Africa's advances and innovations in the water sector. Such fora are also an opportunity to share experiences and knowledge through the exhibition stands, and the many meetings and forums that are taking place.

We had specially requested that our Expo Zaragoza national day take place during August, as this month in South Africa has been declared 'Women's Month' to recognise the role that women played in the struggle for our democracy. On the 9 August in 1956 twenty thousand women gathered on the steps of the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest to Mr JG Strijdom, the then Prime Minister, against the impending pass laws that would severely restrict their freedom of movement and effectively make it illegal for black people to move freely in their own country.

The cry by these twenty thousand women as they presented a petition demanding an end to the pass laws was: "Strijdom, *Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo. Uzakufa!*" – "you strike a woman, you strike a rock. You will be crushed".

Every year we celebrate 9<sup>th</sup> August as a public holiday to recognise the heroic efforts of our mothers and grandmothers to bring about democracy in South Africa.

At the dawn of our democracy and the opening of the first democratically elected Parliament, the then President, Mr Nelson Mandela, whose 90<sup>th</sup> birthday we celebrated recently, set the agenda for addressing the rights of women in a post-apartheid South Africa. He said:

*"Freedom cannot be achieved unless women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression. All of us must take this on board that the objectives of the Reconstruction and Development Programme will not have been realised unless we see, in practical and visible terms, that the conditions of women in our country has been changed for the better and that they have been empowered to intervene in all aspects of life as equals with any other member of society."*

Today as we celebrate women's month in South Africa we take cognisance of the significant strides we have made toward the advancement of women in our country, and what we still need to achieve to bring about greater equality in our society. Since democracy in 1994 many policies and programmes have been developed to enhance the status of women in our society and as a result women occupy key positions in government, business and civil society. Our achievements include that:

- We have a Constitution and Bill of Rights that purposefully protect the rights of women and all vulnerable groups in society.
- We have a legislative framework that aims to facilitate easy access to all social services by women.
- We are proud signatories to international agreements that support women, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).
- We have many pieces of legislation that promote gender equality and empowerment of women, such as the Child Care Act, the Social Assistance Bill, and the Domestic Violence and Maintenance Act.
- We also have numerous programmes and projects that government has developed to focus specifically on women.

There is however still a great deal of work to be done and every sector has a responsibility to ensure the equal participation of women. Within water and sanitation we have been ensuring that there is greater participation of women in the provision of the services that are required; for example the construction of toilets or laying of pipes, and supplying equipment or products that are needed as we expand our water and sanitation services; we are also looking at the educational issues and are supporting young women to become scientists and engineers. Increasing the support available to women to enter these fields is becoming necessary as globally we are faced with a shortage of skilled personnel in these sectors.

Ladies and Gentlemen, women bear the brunt of poor water services and it has been one of the priorities of the South African Government since we attained democracy to bring water and sanitation to our people. One of the themes of Expo Zaragoza is: Water for Life; and it is therefore fitting for us to celebrate our national day with you during this month, and celebrate all that we have achieved in our country to bring water to the majority of our citizens and the positive impact that the provision of this basic service has had on the women of our country.

Former President Mandela started the process in 1994 that began to address the millions of South African's who did not have access to clean water and basic sanitation. In 1994 when the democratic government took office it was estimated that some 15.9 million people across the country lacked adequate water supply services and 20.5 million were without adequate sanitation; with a total population at the time of approximately 45 million people it meant that only 59% of our citizens had access to water and 48% access to sanitation. Today we are proud that through a sustained effort – starting from the President and encompassing all the spheres of our government, 88% of our population now have access to potable tap water and 73% have access to decent sanitation services. Our aim is to address this remaining backlog so that by 2014 we have universal access to water and sanitation services across the country.

Ladies and Gentlemen, these are more than just numbers or statistics – I have visited many rural communities and seen the benefits of our efforts on the lives of ordinary citizens. The mothers and daughters who now do not have to spend countless hours every day going to fetch water from rivers and who now do not have to drink from the same water as animals; the privacy afforded to women who now have decent sanitation; and the health benefits to families as a result of having these services. One can only imagine the positive impact on schooling for the young girls who now have toilets in their school.

I must recognise that our government has not done this alone, we have received significant support from the international community; in particular the European Union, who have contributed to our efforts to bring dignity to our people and address this backlog of people without basic services. Addressing these backlogs is something that all African governments are concerned with and at the recent African Union Heads of State Summit a number of commitments were made by our Heads of State to improving the provision of water and sanitation to our people. We look forward to strong partnerships with the developed world to assist us in addressing these critical issues of access to water and sanitation.

Programme director, concurrent to South Africa's efforts to provide these basic services we have been expanding our water resources infrastructure so that we are able to respond to the increased demand for water from our citizens as well as to ensure there is water to support the robust economic growth that our country is going through. South Africa is currently enjoying its longest period of sustained and uninterrupted

economic growth, and despite the global economic slowdown we still expect economic growth of up to 4% this year. Such growth requires water. There is also no doubt that having access to water and sanitation by our citizens as well as the construction of large scale water infrastructure plays an important contribution to sustained economic growth.

With the impact on climate change on our water resources, it is critical that we have sufficient and adequate infrastructure to adapt to the changes facing us.

To conclude ladies and gentlemen, South Africa is no stranger to hosting large international events, having hosted several prominent ones in recent years such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development; and I must congratulate you on a very successful Expo Zaragoza - I am well aware of the hard work and dedication that such events require, congratulations. We have seen the effort needed as we prepare ourselves to host the 2010 Fifa World Cup and I look forward to welcoming you to South African in two years time. I am also pleased to announce that South Africa has been shortlisted by the World Water Council as possible hosts of the 2012 World Water Forum, another prestigious event in the water sector.

I thank you / ***gracias***