

**ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF WATER AFFAIRS & FORESTRY,
RONNIE KASRILS,
AT A TREE PLANTING AT DELFT
Arbor Day, 31st August 1999**

I am very happy to have this opportunity to greet you all. And today I want to extend a special greeting to the women who live here and in surrounding communities.

This is one of the reasons I am here today. I have come to plant a tree in honour of the women who have been assaulted, raped and killed. To the women who are afraid when they walk down the street. To the women who are too afraid to talk about what has happened to them. To the women who are angry, sad and in pain.

And I want to pay my respects, too, to the families. To those who have shared the grief of the women. To those who have provided support and help in times of trouble. To those who, like the women, feel angry, sad and in pain.

Crimes committed against women are a terrible and frightening thing. They hurt not only the woman herself ... she is the first victim.

But they hurt everyone around her. Her mother and father, her husband and boyfriend, her brother and sister, her son, her daughter and her neighbours.

Crimes against women are an attack on the whole community. And, until women feel really safe in their homes and on the streets, our communities will remain places of fear and anger and grief.

This is why it is not only the women who must come out and cry about the terrible things that are being done to them. The men must cry too. We must all cry. We must cry all over South Africa for an end to these acts of violence.

Today is also National HIV/AIDS Week and I will also be planting a tree in memory of all the sad deaths that have resulted from this terrible scourge. HIV/AIDS is one of the biggest threats to our communities. At the same time, its victims need all our care, respect and gentleness.

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Thirdly, I am going to plant a tree to three events that happened in the Western Cape.

At Langa on 21 March 1960, three people were shot by the police. Their names were Cornwell Tshuma, Leonard Mncube and C Makiwane. Cape Times employee Richard Lombard was killed by the crowd in the chaos that followed the shooting.

On 15 October 1985, in what has become known as the Trojan Horse incident, police fired directly into a crowd of about 100 people on Thornton Road. Michael Cheslyn Miranda, Shaun Magmoed and Jonathan Claasen were killed. Michael Cheslyn Miranda was only eleven years old.

On 25 July 1993, eleven people were killed and fifty-six injured by APLA operatives in what became known as the St James' Church Massacre.

The third tree will be planted in a spirit of reconciliation and will commemorate these three events.

Every year, once a year, as you probably know, the Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry and a few other people go around planting trees.

It is a nice thing to do. Nobody can argue with that. But why do we do it?

When I became the new Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry a few months ago, I started thinking about what Arbor Day means for our country?

‘Arbor’ means tree in Latin. I found that in a dictionary.

But what does that mean for people on the ground? We don’t speak Latin in South Africa. Here in the Cape, we speak Afrikaans and Xhosa and English.

So, if we are going to plant trees on Arbor Day, I thought, how can we begin to make it a truly South African day?

Trees are wonderful things. They give us shade. They make our neighbourhoods green. They add beauty and peace to our lives.

And then I remembered a second thing about trees. We need trees.

Trees enrich the soil and supply the world with oxygen. The big forests of the world convert poisonous gasses into the oxygen the rest of us need to live. This is why there is a big debate about the need to save those forests; why we need to be so careful about how, when and where we cut down trees.

The next thing that I remembered was that many people still use trees and other plants for medicines. The bark and leaves of some trees are used to make things that heal us when we are ill. Many of the things we buy in the pharmacy have parts of plants and trees in them. Things like buchu and eucalyptus and camphor.

And then I discovered a third thing about trees.

I discovered that for many centuries, people have used trees in religious and spiritual ways.

Many years ago in some countries, people planted trees when children were born. They planted them as a celebration of a great event in their lives.

In others places, people planted trees in order to remember someone who had died. As a way to make sure the memory of that person lives forever.

So I realised that a tree can be a very special and remarkable thing. It can make a neighbourhood green and beautiful. It can heal people when they are ill. And it can help us remember a sad or happy event.

Suddenly I began to realise how we can make Arbor Day a special day for all of us here today.

South Africa is a nation that needs trees. In places like this, in the sandy urban deserts that apartheid created, we need to plant trees to help make our neighbourhoods green. We need trees for shade and beauty.

But we need something else in South Africa. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has shown us that we are a nation that needs to deal with its memories, a nation in need of healing.

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Everywhere in South Africa, people have painful memories. Some were cruelly removed from their homes in the City. Some have never had the opportunity to bury their dead. Some have died because of the terrible scourge of HIV/AIDS. Others are bitter about deaths that occurred as a result of criminal acts of violence. Mothers mourn for their daughters. Husbands for their wives. Brothers for their sisters.

Trees are a symbol of life and growth. When we plant a tree, we know that it will live and grow for a long time. Every year it will renew its leaves. It will give beauty, not only to us, but to those who live after us.

And, in the same way, when we plant a tree in memory of somebody, we know that that memory will live on. We know that, every time we see that tree, it will remind us of the person who died or was hurt. It will remind us that there are ways of turning our grief into something good and strong and beautiful.

Trees can also bring people together. They can be a symbol of reconciliation in communities. In KwaZulu-Natal, for example, there will be a tree planting ceremony attended by people from both sides of the conflict.

This year, we have tried to make our Arbor Day celebrations do all these things. We have tried to make it a South Africa day. The events we have arranged are not just so that I can pick up a spade and plant a tree and then go on to my next engagement.

They have been arranged to bring people together in a spirit of renewal, of growth and of reconciliation.

Together ... today ... we will do a thing of great beauty. Every year this tree will put out its leaves and grow a little bigger. It will be a symbol of growth and renewal.

But it will also be a symbol of what we want to remember about the past. It will help us remember what happened in our communities. It will be a memorial to those who suffered, grieved or died.

In Parliament, tomorrow, President Mbeki and his Cabinet will plant a tree in Tuynhuis gardens in remembrance of the Khoisan people, who were persecuted, hunted, killed and cruelly treated by the early settlers in the Cape.

During this Arbor week, we will also remember those who are most vulnerable in our society. At Kirstenbosch gardens, we will honour those who are old and people with disabilities. In Alexandra, another place where there was great suffering in the past, we will celebrate our hopes for the All Africa Games.

We have many other plans. We will not stop when Arbor Day ends. We will not stop planting trees at the end of the week or at the end of the month.

We believe that South Africans must make 'Arbor Day every day'.

This is why we would like to ask all of you ... we would like to ask everyone in South Africa ... to make trees part of our lives.

We are a nation of survivors. We have survived the terrible years of apartheid. Many of us struggle daily to survive poverty. Many struggle with grief and anger.

And the challenges to survival do not end.

Only two days ago, a terrible disaster struck our Cape Flats. Many people are homeless. Many have lost everything they own. People have been killed and badly hurt.

I would like us to spend a moment quietly remembering all those who have been hurt in the past and those who are hurting now.

And I would like us to remember the many people who lost their lives, their homes and their possessions in the disaster that happened the other night.

Let us spend a moment quietly together thinking about these things.

PAUSE FOR REMEMBERING

Thank you.

Before I begin planting the trees, I would like to say a special word of thanks to TOTAL for the enormous contribution they have made to urban greening and our Arbor Day work. I believe I will be announcing the winners of a competition run in the local schools very shortly.

I would also like to commend the provincial Arbor Forum for the training that has been taking place around the Green. Congratulations to those of you who have completed your training. My Department will be sending you certificates very soon.

The three trees that I am about to plant will survive far, far longer than many of us here.

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I would like to think that they it will leave a message for all of us, a message we can leave for our children and our children's children.

I would like to believe that they will offer them shelter from the sun.

And that, with all the other trees that are planted, they will enrich the soil and bring beauty and greenery to this place in the years to come.

And I would like to think also that these trees will carry a deeper, more important message for all of us here.

That they will remind us the work we must do as a nation of survivors. That it will remind us of the need to bring reconciliation and understanding to our communities.

That it will serve as a signpost that we stood here together today and remembered the many other people who could not be with us today.

And I would like to call on all of you, on all South Africans ...

Plant a tree. And heal our land.