

## **Address by the President of the Republic of South Africa, HE Mr Jacob Zuma, to the National Council of Provinces (NCOP)**

29 October 2009, 15h00

The Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces, Honourable Mninawa Mahlangu;

Deputy Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces, Honourable Thandi Memela;

Provincial Premiers;

Members of Parliament;

Representatives of the South African Local Government Association,

Distinguished guests;

Ladies and gentlemen;

The National Council of Provinces occupies a unique and a special place in our democracy.

The Constitution charges the NCOP to represent the provinces in order to “ensure that provincial interests are taken into account in the national sphere of government”.

This chamber has to perform this important function by mainly participating in the national legislative process and by providing a national forum for public consideration of issues affecting the provinces.

The Constitution says that representatives of local government may also participate in the proceedings of the NCOP when the need arises.

The NCOP therefore is the meeting point of the three spheres of government.

It is a forum where the elected representatives of our people should jointly discuss the major issues facing our republic and its citizens.

Chairperson, Honourable Members

Our young democracy faces significant challenges.

Though we have achieved much, there is much more that we need to do.

Just as we cannot allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by these challenges, we dare not underestimate them.

If we are to build the thriving nation for which we have worked so hard, and for which so many have sacrificed so much, we need to appreciate the extent and nature of these challenges.

I would like to highlight two critical challenges, both of which, in different ways, have the potential to undermine our efforts to achieve a better life for our people.

The first of these challenges relates to our economy.

The global economy is going through a major economic crisis.

The impact of this crisis has been felt by every section of our society.

Businesses, both big and small, have been closed.

Thousands of workers have lost their jobs.

As more families lose their livelihoods and businesses risk collapse, they look to government for assistance.

And yet government's ability to assist has been weakened.

As the Minister of Finance indicated in his address to the National Assembly on Tuesday, government revenues are down and the budget deficit is up.

Our ability to assist those in need has been placed under strain.

With fewer funds available, we nevertheless need to provide health care to the sick, education to our youth, and social grants to the most vulnerable in our society.

Our challenges compel us to do more with less.

We have to ensure that limited public resources are spent on those things that serve a greater public good.

The Medium Term Budget Policy Statement that Minister Gordhan presented this week underscores this imperative.

It presents a spending programme that places the interests of ordinary South Africans – particularly the poor and vulnerable – at the centre of government's work.

It recognises that we will need to borrow more to meet our needs.

We are determined, however, to contain our borrowing requirement within sustainable limits, to ensure that we do not burden future generations with our debt.

Chairperson, Honourable Members,

We are facing arguably our greatest economic challenge since the advent of democracy.

We do so against the backdrop of a global recession not of our making, and in an economic and social environment still dominated by the distortions of our apartheid past.

South Africa has long been plagued by structural unemployment, with the result that a sizable portion of our population has been without work for many years.

Many of our people do not have the skills needed to find employment.

Though it absorbs a significant amount of our budget, our education system does not produce the outcomes we require.

Apartheid planning continues to have a significant impact on poor people living in both rural and urban areas.

The lack of basic infrastructure in these areas, and their location far from economic centres, severely limits opportunities for millions of our people.

These are among the challenges we face.

We need to recognise them and properly understand them.

For only then, can we ensure that we respond appropriately.

Chairperson, Honourable Members,

It is our firm belief that indeed this government is responding appropriately to these challenges.

The steps we need to take to respond to the recession cannot be separated from the longer term task of transforming our economy and society.

That is why we borrow not to bail out banks and failing businesses, but to invest in economic infrastructure, education, health care, rural development and the fight against crime.

That is why we see in this recession an opportunity to improve the operation of government and ensure that it better utilises scarce resources.

That is a task in which we would like to see this National Council playing a prominent role.

We have created new departments and reformed others in order to focus on the important priorities on which our people expect us to deliver.

I would mention in particular the establishment of the new Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, which replaced the former Department of Provincial and Local Government.

The change in the name is more than cosmetic.

It draws attention to the role that we think this new department should play.

Chapter 3 of the Constitution of the Republic enjoins all spheres of government to cooperate with one another in mutual trust and good faith by fostering friendly relations; assisting and

supporting one another; consulting one another on matters of common interest; and coordinating their actions and legislation with one another.

The experience of the last fifteen years of our democracy has taught us that the three spheres of government have not always lived up to these constitutional injunctions.

More often than not, the three spheres of government pull in different directions.

Their actions are not coordinated.

We have therefore established this new department to assist us to ensure that government works in a cooperative and coordinated fashion.

I ask for your support and assistance to make sure that this department and all other departments meet their mandates.

In that way, we can use this crisis to ensure that our three spheres of government work better together to improve people's lives.

Though we may be buffeted by the uncertain winds of the global economy, we are not helpless.

Working together, determined that our common national programme should succeed, we can and will weather this particular storm.

Chairperson, Honourable Members,

The second challenge that I wish to highlight is no less grave.

Indeed, if we do not respond with urgency and resolve, we may well find our vision of a thriving nation slipping from our grasp.

Recent statistics from the Department of Health, Human Sciences Research Council, Medical Research Council, Statistics SA and other sources paint a disturbing picture of the health of our nation.

They show that nearly 6 out of 10 deaths in our country in 2006 were deaths of people younger than 50 years.

If we consider mortality trends over the last decade, we see that the age at which people die has been changing dramatically.

More and more people are dying young, threatening even to outnumber in proportional terms those who die in old age.

Honourable Members, South Africans are dying at an increasing rate.

The number of deaths registered in 2008 jumped to 756,000, up from 573,000 the year before.

At this rate, there is a real danger that the number of deaths will soon overtake the number of births. The births registered during this period were one million two hundred and five thousand one hundred and eleven (1, 205, 111).

The Independent Electoral Commission had to remove 396 336 deceased voters from the Voters Roll during September last year and August this year.

What is even more disturbing is the number of young women who are dying in the prime of their life, in their child-bearing years.

In 2006, life expectancy at birth for South African men was estimated to be 51 years.

By contrast, life expectancy in Algeria was 70 years and 60 years in Senegal.

These are some of the chilling statistics that demonstrate the devastating impact that HIV and AIDS is having on our nation.

Not even the youngest are spared.

Some studies suggest that 57% of the deaths of children under the age of five during 2007 were as a result of HIV.

This situation is aggravated by the high tuberculosis prevalence.

The co-infection rate between HIV and TB has now reached a staggering 73%.

Statistics indicate that the numbers of citizens with TB number at 481 584.

These statistics do not, however, fully reveal the human toll of the disease.

It is necessary to go into the hospitals, clinics and hospices of our country to see the effects of HIV and AIDS on those who should be in the prime of their lives.

It is necessary to go into people's homes to see how families struggle with the triple burden of poverty, disease and stigma.

Wherever you go across the country, you hear people lament the apparent frequency with which they have to bury family members and friends.

Chairperson, Honourable Members,

Let me emphasise that although we have a comprehensive strategy to tackle HIV and AIDS that has been acknowledged internationally, and though we have the largest anti-retroviral programme in the world, we are not yet winning this battle. We must come to terms with this reality as South Africans.

We must accept that we need to work harder, and with renewed focus, to implement the strategy that we have developed together.

We need to do more, and we need to do better, together.

We need to move with urgency and purpose to confront this enormous challenge.

If we are to stop the progress of this disease through our society, we will need to pursue extraordinary measures.

We will need to mobilise all South Africans to take responsibility for their health and well-being and that of their partners, their families and their communities.

All South Africans must know that they are at risk and must take informed decisions to reduce their vulnerability to infection, or, if infected, to slow the advance of the disease.

Most importantly, all South Africans need to know their HIV status, and be informed of the treatment options available to them.

Though it poses a grave threat to the well-being of our nation, HIV and AIDS should be treated like any other disease.

There should be no shame, no discrimination, no recriminations. We must break the stigma surrounding AIDS.

In just over a month, we will join people across the globe in marking World Aids Day.

Let us resolve now that this should be the day on which we start to turn the tide in the battle against AIDS.

Let us resolve now that this should be the day on which we outline those additional measures that need to be taken to enhance our efforts.

Let World Aids Day, on the 1st of December 2009, mark the beginning of a massive mobilisation campaign that reaches all South Africans, and that spurs them into action to safeguard their health and the health of the nation.

Though a considerable undertaking, it is well within our means, and we should start now, today, to prepare ourselves for this renewed onslaught against this epidemic.

We have very impressive awareness levels in our country, well over 95%.

We should now seriously work to convert that knowledge into a change of behaviour.

We have demonstrated in the past that, working together as a nation, we can overcome even the greatest of challenges.

We can and will overcome this one.

But we must begin by acknowledging the true nature of that with which we are confronted.

We should not be disheartened by what we find.

Rather, we should be encouraged to act with greater energy and motivation to overcome.

I have instructed the Minister of Health, as we prepare for World Aids Day, to provide further detail to the nation on the impact of HIV and AIDS on our people.

He will do so next week.

The important factor is that our people must be armed with information.

Knowledge will help us to confront denialism and the stigma attached to the epidemic.

Informed by this understanding, we expect that the South African National AIDS Council, under the leadership of the Deputy President of the Republic, Mr Kgalema Motlanthe, will develop a set of measures that strengthen the programmes already in place.

We must not lose sight of the key targets that we set ourselves in our national strategic plan.

These include the reduction of the rate of new infections by 50%, and the extension of the antiretroviral programme to 80% of those who need it, both by 2011.

Prevention remains a critical part of our strategy. We need a massive change in behaviour and attitude especially amongst the youth. We must all work together to achieve this goal.

As we prepare for World Aids Day, and as we undertake the programmes that must necessarily follow, let us draw on our experience of mass mobilisation and social engagement.

The renewed energy in the fight against AIDS and in mobilising towards World Aids Day must start now, by all sectors of our society.

Working together, we cannot fail.

Chairperson, Honourable Members,

The NCOP has led the way in taking Parliament to the people.

We should build on this innovation to foster a close working relationship between government and citizens and between parliament and the people.

I have come before you to ask for your cooperation and support in renewing this communal spirit and cooperation.

It will help us to deal with the challenges we face, especially HIV and AIDS and its impact.

Whatever challenges we face, we will overcome.

Whatever setbacks we endure, we will prevail.

Because by working together we can and will build a thriving nation.

I thank you.