

Dear Fellow South African,

During my visit to the Waterberg last week to launch the District Development Model, I spent time talking to people in the villages around Lephalale, at the Medupi power station and to business people in the town.

They all raised access to water as a serious issue: to sustain their lives and support agriculture in villages, to drive business, and to supply the world's fourth largest coal-fired power station.

South Africa is a severely water stressed country. We do not have mighty rivers that flow all season like in other parts of Africa and the world.

In fact, with an average annual rainfall of 500mm compared to a global average of 860mm, we are the world's 30th driest country.

A decade-long drought has put immense pressure on our water systems and has had a devastating impact on agriculture and communities, especially in the Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, Western Cape, Free State and Mpumalanga.

Dam levels are currently on average around 58%, compared to 69% for the same time last year.

Our existing water systems are already over-exploited as usage increases rapidly due to population growth and as more homes get connected to water. Combine this with the worsening effects of climate change and we are clearly facing a dire situation.

Unless we take drastic measures to conserve water sources and promote efficient use, water insecurity will become the biggest developmental and economic challenge facing this country. Our current energy challenges will seem small by comparison.

Although we have made substantial progress in providing water to our citizens over the past 25 years, access to water and deteriorating water quality continues to fuel service delivery protests.

We must improve access to water for communities, upgrade water infrastructure, and manage water more carefully, or face social unrest.

Water security isn't just integral to ensuring the well-being of our people, it is critical to our economy, and to our goal to accelerate industrialisation and expand mining and agriculture.

During our visit to Lephalale business and industry representatives repeated what has become a familiar refrain, that economic development is being held back by drought, poor water infrastructure and delays in obtaining water use licenses.

As part of our efforts to remove bureaucratic barriers to economic growth we have directed that the water permit office should reduce the waiting time for water licenses, and significant progress has been made. The waiting period has been reduced quite dramatically.

The National Disaster Management Centre is coordinating measures to alleviate the impact of the drought. Relief projects, like emergency borehole drilling and water tankers, are in place in affected areas, and demand is being managed through water restrictions and rationing.

Municipalities are also installing bulk meters at reservoirs, repairing leaks and burst pipes, throttling water outlets at

night to replenish reservoir supplies, and upgrading existing water treatment works. Successful public employment programmes such as Working for Water, which eradicates alien invasive plants, and Working on Fire are being scaled up.

Earlier this year, government provided R260 million in response to the drought. We have offered support to farmers to purchase fodder, reticulate water for livestock and for dam desilting.

Given the severity of the crisis, this amount is woefully inadequate. Disaster Management is working with provinces and municipalities to see how they can reprioritise their budgets for relief and recovery.

In the long term, especially if the drought persists, we will also have to research technologies such as evaporation suppression, fog harvesting and cloud seeding.

The country's water infrastructure build is ongoing, as highlighted in the Water and Sanitation Master Plan released last week.

To ensure our future water security, we will need funding of at least R126 billion for infrastructure. With existing freshwater supplies dwindling, we will be focusing on projects that broaden our water resource mix. For example, Phase 1 of the uMkhomazi Water Project will prioritise the re-use of effluent, and projects like the Groot Letaba Water Augmentation Project in Limpopo and the Mzimvubu Water Project in the Eastern Cape will develop groundwater sources.

Mismanagement of water resources and corruption in the water sector has in no small part contributed to the situation we currently face.

Serious accountability and governance issues persist, whether it is in the building of infrastructure or at a municipal level, where water losses are mounting as a result of billing errors, unauthorised usage and outright theft.

Just a week ago, the Special Investigating Unit raided Lepelle Northern Water in connection with alleged corruption at the Giyani Water Project. The amount allegedly involved – R2 billion – is staggering, but unfortunately symptomatic of widescale tender corruption in these mega projects.

This is putting the entire nation's water security at risk, and the ongoing SIU probes into irregularities in these projects will continue. As will the work of the Hawks' National Clean Audit Task team probing municipalities, where corruption in the provision of tankering services has frequently been alleged. Accountability will be enforced as part of restoring integrity to the sector.

Water conservation is everyone's responsibility, and I call on all South Africans to play their part.

Domestic users must use water more sparingly and reduce their consumption.

Municipalities must invest in water recycling technologies that save both water and money. Industrial users must implement measures towards water use efficiency.

We must manage our water sources wisely to meet the basic needs of communities and industry, as we drive social transformation so that we can achieve the South Africa we want.

If we fail to do so we could soon find ourselves worse off than Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, who wailed: "Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink."

Unless we act now, we may not have water anywhere.

All the best,

Cyril Ramaphosa