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PROCEEDINGS AT JOINT SITTING

Members of the National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces assembled in the Nieuwmeester Marquee at 14:04.

The Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces took the Chair and requested members to observe a moment of silence for prayers or meditation.

The CHAIRPERSON OF THE NCOP: Hon members, can we quietly take our seats for those who are coming into the House? Today marks the first day or the beginning of Ramadan. We would like to take this opportunity and wish the Muslim community a happy Ramadan. Order, hon members. The Secretary will now read the Order of the Day. I now call on the President to come and address the House. [Applause.]

REPLY BY THE PRESIDENT TO DEBATE ON THE STATE OF THE NATION

ADDRESS

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The PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC: Madam Speaker, Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces, Deputy President Shipokosa Paulus Mashatile, Ministers and Deputy Ministers, hon members, yesterday, former President Zuma was in the House. I asked whether he is in the House today, but it seems he is not. I wanted to extend my greetings to him. [Applause]

Let me take this opportunity, Madam Speaker, as you have alluded to the fact that this is the first day of Ramadan, to wish all the Muslims, both in our country, across our continent, and around the world, Ramadan Mubarak, the best. Madam Speaker, I would like to thank you, the Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces, and the other presiding officers, for overseeing and chairing this very important Joint Sitting of the Cabinet so well and so excellently.

Yes, we can applaud. We can applaud our presiding officers for the excellent work that they have done. [Applause.] I want to welcome all members who participated in this debate and confirm that through their contributions - whether negative or positive, we demonstrate that we are a nation of builders. We are a nation that does not run away from problems that our country faces. We confront them. We do not lament and

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complain. We find solutions. When faced with challenges, we do not fracture. We do not fall apart. We do not collapse; instead, we unite and we work together to overcome those challenges. And so, as we conclude this debate on the state of the nation address, our shared commitment to our country and to our people must guide us in every action that we take in the year ahead.

The state of the nation address is about building a stronger South Africa. It is about rising to the challenges that we face in our own country and around the world, and emerging more prosperous, more secure and more resilient. There can be no doubt that we have made progress. Even those who deny that we have made progress know that we have made progress.

[Applause.]

Over 30 years, we have fundamentally improved the lives of South Africans. Over the last eight years, our country has faced some of the most intractable and difficult challenges. But working together, we have undertaken a programme of institutional renewal by stabilising what was weakened through state capture, restoring integrity and accountability, and

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rebuilding the capacity of the state to serve the people of South Africa. [Applause.]

We have overcome a global pandemic that led to the worst decline in our economy, where our GDP contracted, perhaps for the first time, by 6%. We stood firm in the face of an attempted insurrection that was aimed at destabilising our democracy. We rebuilt in the wake of catastrophic flooding that engulfed three provinces and brought an end to more than 15 years of load shedding. [Applause.]

Through effective macroeconomic management, we have been able to tackle an unsustainable debt burden, where we ended up spending more service costs on our debt than we spent on health and education. To deal with all these challenges, we have had to rebuild the capacity of the state but also embark on major reforms, whilst at the same time addressing the immediate challenges that our people are facing. All these efforts have been aimed at improving the lives of our people and creating a conducive environment for our economy to grow.

Make no mistake, along the way, we have made errors. There have been missteps. We have made mistakes. But on a continuous

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basis, we have sought to do work that will advance the interests of South Africans. Over the past year, we have seen promising signs of recovery. Whether people like it or not, it has been there. Whether people think it's an illusion, it has been there. Whether people think we have turned the corner or not, they are blind, because we are turning the corner. That is where we are. We see this in the steps that we are taking to reduce unemployment and accelerate growth. We see the signs of recovery in improved public finances, in lower inflation and growing business and consumer confidence.

Although the progress is modest - much more modest than what I would want - the momentum of change, however, is building. Our task now is to sustain this momentum, to protect and build on the progress that we have made and are continuing to make, and to ensure that this progress results in tangible improvement in the life of every South African.

Improved economic indicators may seem distant and abstract, but they have a real impact on our lives. Lower borrowing costs for the state frees up resources for health and education. It frees up resources for police and for better services. Reduced public debt enables us and the private

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sector to invest more of its capital in expanding production and in employing more people.

A lower inflation rate reduces the cost of living for our people, enabling families to pay for food and basic services at a lower price. A declining unemployment rate means an income for more families and a hope for more young and middle-aged South Africans. And yet, as we have heard in this debate, we still have a long way to go - admittedly so.

More than 10 million South Africans are estimated to live below the food poverty line. More than 11 million people are unemployed, we acknowledge that. These are not simple statistics; these are individuals, families and communities facing great hardships - experiencing violence on a daily basis, running short of food, facing water cuts, and longing for a better life.

We can stand on the sidelines and lament - as some have done in this debate and throw insults. Or we can roll up our sleeves and work together to change this reality, build a stronger economy that benefits all South Africans and a more

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equal society in which all South Africans have a place, both in their own country and in the sun.

The state of the nation address outlined the steps we are taking as the Government of National Unity, working together with all social partners and all sections of society, to achieve these objectives. We are determined to reach every person in this effort. In that regard, we are determined to leave no one behind.

Through the measures that we are taking, we are improving the lives of young people in our society. And through the child support grant, for instance, which reaches easily 13 million children, we are protecting millions of children from the worst effects of poverty. Through free primary health care for pregnant women and children under six, we are improving the health of children.

This programme, inaugurated by our first democratically elected President Nelson Mandela, continues and persists and shall not be ended because it is of benefit to our people. We are directing more resources to early childhood development, ECD. We have increased the subsidy for early childhood

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development and made Grade R compulsory for all children, establishing a solid base for their entry into the education system. We are focusing on strengthening literacy and numeracy in the foundation phase. We have admitted that this is a process or a programme we should have started right at the dawn of democracy. We are late and we have lost a lot of time, but as they say in the classics, "Better late than never." We are doing it now. [Applause.]

Through the measures we are putting in place to end child stunting, we will improve the developmental outcomes and life prospects of millions of children in our country. These measures will fundamentally change the prospect of an entire generation of children and each generation that will follow thereafter. On none of these issues is government working alone. We are working with social partners, service providers, and nongovernmental organisations, NGOs, that are committed to the development of our country, parents and communities.

At this moment, more than 3,5 million people between the ages 15 and 24 are not in education, employment and training. We are working together to change that. In addition to the steady increase in the matric pass rate, which all of us are proud

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of, more and more learners from schools and poor communities are passing and achieving unbelievable university exemptions - something many of us never thought could happen easily.

Despite being educated in some of the worst schools - from an infrastructure point of view, from a distant point of view, from limited resources deep in the rural areas of our country, gems - real absolute wonderful gems - are coming out. The bright children of this country are emerging. More and more students from poor backgrounds are being supported to attend universities and colleges.

In the five years from 2019 and 2024, funding from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, NSFAS, nearly doubled from R27 billion to R54 billion. [Applause.] This is what we make available for children from poor families, families who would never have afforded to take their children to college or to university. Now we are undertaking a fundamental overhaul of our skills development system by embracing the dual skills development model which has helped other countries to reduce their unemployment levels.

This will produce the skills that our economy needs and enable more and more young people to find meaningful and lasting work

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and become professionals: architects, engineers, technicians and artisans. We know that it will take many years for the economy to grow enough to create enough jobs for all those who are looking for work. That is why we introduced initiatives like the Presidential Employment Stimulus. The programme has the word 'presidential' because it brings together the work of all other departments and co-ordinates at the centre of government and gets every department to participate by making a contribution from their budgets to make this work programme or work initiative possible. To date, it has created more than 2,5 million work and livelihood opportunities.

Since its establishment in 2020 - remember that we established the Youth Employment Service, Yes, in the wake of COVID-19 - which was also initiated by co-operation between the private sector and government. We have been able to provide over 214 young people with experience opportunities, and this is a number that is growing. These young people are entering industries such as manufacturing, renewable energy, tourism, logistics, finance and the digital economy. As I travel around, I often meet young people who say, "Mr President, I am part of the Yes graduates. I got in and I now have a full-time job, and I thank South Africa very much.

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Over 5,7 million young people are now registered on the SA Youth platform. To date, over 2 million earning opportunities have been secured by the young people who participate on this platform. Now, many young people in our country know that there is this platform and they flight their CVs on it. They flight whatever experience they have on this platform and employers pile in and identify those that they would want to employ. It is a live and unique programme, possibly the one in the world that many countries are learning from.

These opportunities provide more than an income, they provide young people with skills and experience while also contributing to social development. These opportunities are making a real difference in the lives of millions of young people. And of course, we would like it to grow to encompass many more young people. They keep flocking in, flighting their CVs on this system. This helps to prepare them for a better future, yet we know that what will make the greatest difference in people's lives are jobs and real livelihood opportunities.

What will make the greatest difference is accelerated economic growth. A growing economy means expanding opportunities for

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all and it also brings hope. We have not experienced the excitement of the promise of rapid growth for almost 20 years as a country. But we are on the cusp of achieving it now. We are focused on rebuilding the economy and driving investment. We should not underestimate the scale of the task that lies ahead nor diminish the progress that we have made.

For our economy to grow, we are steadily addressing the various impediments that have been identified as holding our economy back. Load shedding was one of those that held our economy back. It was debilitating our economy, lowering production, raising costs and deterring investments. Now where are we? We have effectively ended load shedding and investments are now flowing in.

We have stopped load shedding. We have stopped unreliable power that raised costs, stopped production and deterred investment. Wherever I went in the world and other places, people kept talking about energy. They said: "Improve the energy supply in your country, we will come and invest." That is precisely what we did and that is precisely what we are doing.

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Overburdened infrastructure and inefficiency at our ports and on our rail lines have for years been reducing our competitiveness and harming our export industries. We are improving operational performance through investment, increased capacity and far-reaching reforms through which we are even crowding in partners on a concessionary basis to bring in their money so that we can improve our network industries.

We are addressing the skills mismatch between what young people have and what our economy needs through an overhaul of the education and training system. To respond to low levels of investment and policy uncertainty, we are strengthening policy formulation and reducing regulatory burdens. During their Budget Votes, Ministers will outline precisely some of the active steps we are taking to reduce regulatory burdens that many of our businesspeople raise with us.

We have had to tackle poor governance, diminish state capacity and tackle corruption. We are doing this by professionalising the public service, improving efficiency, and modernising our procurement system. This is something that is now going to happen. We know that crime and insecurity remain significant

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impediments to growth which is why we are intensifying the fight against organised crime, gang violence, gun crime and gender-based violence. I know that in this House there are those who say: "Mr President, deploy the Defence Force to come and help the police in our areas." And there are those who say: "No, don't do that."

We are going to deploy the Defence Force as we have said. We are going to include the Eastern Cape because the people there have raised their voices to this. [Applause.] Yes, we are going to capacitate our police. We are going to make sure that the Defence Force becomes focused on ensuring that we rid our areas and our country of gang violence. We deployed the Defence Force to work together with the police on illegal mining areas, and we were able to tackle that problem. It has reappeared in another form, but we are tackling it. Illegal miners are now forcing communities and people out of their houses, but the Defence Force is in their wake. The good thing is, as we heard on this platform from the hon member from Kagiso, the community is ready and willing to work with our security forces - something that we welcome.

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Our economy has also been constrained by a challenging macroeconomic environment, which is why we have been reducing high debt service costs and supporting lower inflation and the interest rates are tapering down. Perhaps one of the most immediate impediments to faster economic growth is the dysfunctionality in many of our municipalities. We are addressing this through an overhaul of our local government system, through the review that we are now busy with of the White Paper and through direct interventions in municipalities that are in trouble. The transformation of our network industries is in the end a platform on which rapid inclusive economic growth will be achieved.

South Africans are already feeling the benefits of some of the changes - from improved supply of electricity to the return to service of commuter rail lines, and to the reduction in the cost of data as well. In 2022 we had 205 days of load shedding, and in 2023 we had 330 days. This was the most severe period in our energy crisis that stretched back more than 15 years. To address this, we established the National Energy Crisis Committee or Necom as we call it. There were groans from some quarters who said: "Yet another committee, yet another structure, yet another task team."

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We have heard the same tired refrain from some speakers in this debate. Yet what Nekom did was to bring together all the key players to focus on the immediate tasks that are necessary to end load shedding, to restore the integrity of our power system and to lay the basis for stable, sustainable and universal access to electricity into the future. It succeeded because it was able to draw on the skills, capabilities, resources and efforts of a broad range of departments and public institutions, as well as the best experts in South Africa and around the world and to build a platform for collaboration with social partners. It was never about meetings and talkshops, it was about taking a hands-on approach to solving the problem, making sure that things do actually get done and that they get done quickly. That's what it was about.

The experience of Nekom shows that complex problems need collaborative solutions. Through its generation recovery plan, Eskom has increased its average Energy Available Factor from 56% in April 2023 to around 65% and ageing towards 70% at the moment. There is currently a pipeline of more than 220 GW of renewable energy projects at various stages of development.

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You can ask Minister Kgosientsho Ramokgopa how we measure those gigawatts and he will explain it so well - in neutrons and electrons and all that. So, spend time with him because he will explain all that to you, if it is Latin to you. The Minister of Electricity and Energy is leading the process of building more than 14,000 km of new transmission lines and an innovative new model of funding with inherited costs. This includes ensuring that we have a transmission line that is going to sustain all these neutrons that are going to be uplifted onto our grid.

For an economy that has long been held back by energy constraints, these developments are potentially transformative for homes that have suffered years of electricity supply interruptions. The end of load shedding is a relief. I saw what a relief it was one day when I was in Hout Bay on the quay at the harbour and a young man of five years came to me and said, "Mr President, please give us electricity, I want to play on my Playstation." I knew then what all this meant because that is what we needed to do. This is good for business, and it is good for the removal of obstacles to growth.

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The next phase of our energy transformation is the establishment and the restructuring of the state-owned enterprise, which is Eskom. The establishment of Eskom to generate electricity with others for the transmission entity and for distribution is a complex process and one of the most important reforms our country will ever face. It requires detailed technical work and strong co-ordination across different entities.

This is why I have said that this work will be done through Necom, with the participation of the Minister of Electricity and Energy, the Minister of Finance, the Presidency and all the officials as well as those who have been giving us support and assistance. As I said, the work that they have to do will need to address the assets of Eskom and how we are going to deal with the transmission entity and related matters. I have no doubt whatsoever that all this work will culminate in a solution which will be put before me so that Cabinet can then take a decision going forward.

The value of establishing these types of structures is to enhance intergovernmental co-operation as well as breaking down the silos that have often given rise in government.

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Drawing on our experience in the energy sector and what we have established as the National Logistics Crisis Committee, NLCC, we believe that we will be able to make great progress. Thanks to the work of the NLCC, as we call it. We have already seen a real turnaround in the performance of our freight lines and ports.

The volume of goods transported by rail is increasing year on year, and the efficiency of our port terminals has improved. Collaboration between Transnet and the private sector has, for example, has seen a 50% reduction in security incidents where people were stealing copper cables on our coal line to Richards Bay. The total length of cables stolen has been reduced from 180 km in 2024 to just 58 km or 59 km. We want to see that reduced even further and for criminality to come to an end.

The reform of our logistics system is well underway through strong collaboration between the Department of Transport, the Presidency as well as the National Treasury. This year will be a watershed moment for our logistics reform as private rail companies begin to operate our freight rail network on a concessionary basis and for private sector participation to

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initiate port and rail infrastructure. In undertaking these far-reaching changes, we are essentially strengthening the state, and we are rebuilding our state-owned enterprises.

We are mobilising investment on a massive scale from a range of public and private sources into electricity generation and transmission into our ports and rail and into our water infrastructure. We are mobilising new skills, new capabilities and new technologies. Let me be clear: we are retaining public ownership for those who believe that we are privatising. All we are doing is to bring in strategic partners, which we have done in the past.

Private train operators will carry freight on rail lines that are owned by the state. Private electricity producers will provide electricity to consumers across a transmission grid that is owned by the state. Through these changes we are strengthening the financial position and the operational performance of entities like Eskom, Transnet and the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa, Prasa. We are making them more competitive and more efficient.

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We will now apply the successful method that we have used in energy and logistics to other urgent challenges that confront our country today. We are already working to establish a National Water Crisis Committee to restore a reliable supply of water to our municipalities that face disruptions right now but also to ensure water security in the long term.

This afternoon, Minister Majodina made an announcement to increase the reservoir's capacity, particularly in the Gauteng area. Like electricity and logistics sectors, the water crisis has many causes that stretch back many years. We have already embarked on a far-reaching reform process that will fundamentally change the way the water sector in our country functions and serves the people of our country.

In the end, this will enable investment in water infrastructure to meet the growing demand and build our resilience to climate change, alongside institutional reforms that enable greater investment and stronger regulation of water service delivery. It will also require mobilising resources and expertise to support municipalities that are in crisis and make interventions more quickly and more effectively where they consistently fail to meet set norms and

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standards. The National Water Crisis Committee is building on the work that the Water Task Team have already done – chaired by the Deputy President, Operation Vulindlela, the Department of Water and Sanitation and by various respective municipalities to drive local production and create more jobs in sectors with great potential.

We are finalising our National Industrial Policy focusing on decarbonisation diversification and digitisation. This will contribute to building an economy that is equipped for the future, drawing on the vast capabilities and the abundant resources that we have, including both natural resources and human capital resources. As we build an economy for the future, a number of industries in our country are currently in distress.

The Presidency, together with the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition and the Department of Electricity and Energy, as many of these are distressed because of energy affordability. We are working with individual companies and sectors to develop short-term plans aimed at staving off closure and saving local jobs. Among the sectors that are involved are cement, the automotive sector, the steel sector,

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the pharmaceuticals as well as the various smelters that we have in our country, whether it's manganese or chrome.

In addition, there are sectors such as oil and gas that require co-ordination across government departments and planning together with business and labour. In all these efforts, we have to show determination and urgency. It is not only in the area of economic growth and transformation where collaboration, partnership and focus need to play a key role.

We are also establishing a dedicated initiative to oversee the reform of the criminal justice system, leaning on the successful model of Operation Vulindlela. This initiative will be led by the best experts that our country has to offer. It will work closely with the SA Police Service, the National Prosecuting Authority, the Special Investigating Unit and other law enforcement agencies to drive a comprehensive reform programme.

Other countries, when faced with the threat of organised crime and the penetration of criminal syndicates, have been able to reform their criminal justice systems and restore the rule of

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law. That is precisely what we are also going to focus on. We have the resources and ability to do so.

We will not allow criminals, criminal syndicates and gangs to prevail. We are going to go after them, and we will deal with them. [Applause.] One of the most important developments in recent years has been the mobilisation of society to end violence that men perpetrate against women. Faced with this pandemic of violence, South Africans came together to develop a National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide. Since the adoption of the plan, government departments, agencies, NGOs, business organisations, sporting bodies, educational institutions and others have been working together to implement the six pillars of this plan.

In working on the implementation of this plan, they understood that gender-based violence and femicide cannot be stopped by government alone. It must be stopped by society. It must also be stopped by this Parliament. Since the law was passed, and since you crafted the law that you should appoint the council members, I have been waiting for you to finalise the appointment of the council. The women of our country have been

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impatient, waiting for this Parliament to finalise the appointment of the council.

Over the past five years, South Africa has made progress in critical areas of gender-based violence. We have strengthened the laws, expanded survivor-centred services through the Thuthuzela Care Centres. Although I must say that we still have too few Thuthuzela Care Centres, I want us to have more Thuthuzela Care Centres so that the women of our country can have refuge.

We have rolled out victim-friendly rooms at police stations and invested in women's economic empowerment as a critical pillar of prevention. For the first time, we have a national prevalence study that gives us clear evidence of the scale and drivers of gender-based violence. These gains matter, and they show what is possible when the state and civil society act together. And yes, we are going to move towards having social workers in the police stations, because that is going to be one of the gamechangers.

The classification of gender-based violence and femicide as a national disaster enables all spheres of government to act

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with greater speed, reduces the fragmentation of effort, and establishes a clear command, co-ordination, and accountability framework. It gives both government and broader society far greater capacity and impetus to implement the measures that I outlined in the state of the nation address.

These measures include the mobilisation of all sectors of society to challenge harmful attitudes and practices. We are continuing the extensive work already underway to promote women's economic empowerment, strengthening our law enforcement and scale-up survivor support. The premiers who spoke during the debate highlighted the progress that is being made across the country in strengthening local economies, improving service delivery, and investing in the future.

I was very pleased to hear the articulation by our premiers of the work that they are doing, showing that South Africa is a unitary state, and provinces are taking the lead in a number of areas - in infrastructure investment, from the resuscitation of the Pilanesberg Airport in North West to the rehabilitation of roads and bridges in KwaZulu-Natal.

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Then there is an innovative partnership between Limpopo provincial government and mining companies to mobilise funding for the construction and maintenance of local roads. Provinces like the Free State are investing in education, refurbishing and maintaining ECD centres, building new schools and hostels, ensuring that all learners from poor communities attend no-fee schools and are part of the National School Nutrition Programme.

Mpumalanga has launched the e-learning programme, Ubuhlebusile, which is designed to bridge the digital divide through the use of smart devices. We welcome the initiative by KwaZulu-Natal to forge provincial skills compacts with the private sector in logistics, in energy, in construction and the digital economy. We also heard about how Mpumalanga is investing in health, appointing doctors to community health centres and building new clinics and hospitals, including the Middelburg Regional Hospital and the Mapulaneng Hospital.

Limpopo is providing leadership on tackling the country's water challenges, establishing operational war rooms in the Mopani District, particularly in Giyani, to ensure that water reaches the remaining five to 20 villages. The premier of the

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Northern Cape outlined the work that they are doing and have done in the province to drive investment in mining, renewable energy, infrastructure and education and health. It is these efforts that have contributed to the steady improvement of employment.

In the Eastern Cape, roads are being built. In the Western Cape, the focus is on fighting criminality. The premier spoke with great passion here about the need to tackle gangs. So, all our provinces are doing much work to improve the lives of our people in our country. And that pleased me no end. Gauteng has introduced the Rapid Land Release Programme to enable investment and expand access to affordable housing.

The Western Cape is also contributing to job creation by expanding tourism, increasing air access and promoting foreign direct investment in key sectors. The Free State is setting an example in the provision of government services through the Integrated Services Programme to reach rural and underserved communities. This initiative brings together various government entities and departments to offer comprehensive services to communities ranging from the issuance of title deeds, birth certificates and IDs to business support.

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The premier of the Free State spoke about how losing the province's number one status in matric results has spurred them to do better and to regain its position. She spoke with a little bit of pain that they have lost that number one slot to KwaZulu-Natal. We welcome that determination, as provinces should be learning from each other. She promised that the Free State would be back to the number one slot once again. We wish her well. Now we want our provinces to make sure that we work together as a unitary state.

Provinces should be driven by improvements and lessons that they see in other provinces so that they not only improve their matric pass rates but their health outcomes. They can improve their service delivery by learning from each other. They should learn what other provinces are doing to reduce crime.

They should also learn from each other on infrastructure development and maintenance and many other areas because healthy competition encourages innovation and improves efficiency, accountability and transparency. I say this because provinces should never be afraid to see what others are doing so that they can also learn and improve. In the end,

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you can correctly say that KwaZulu-Natal has learned what Free State has been doing for years and as a result, they improved their education outcomes. Similarly, other provinces should do the same. I know for a fact that the Northern Cape has been learning from the Free State. That is why they have had such great improvement.

We have seen the value of government working together as they do so through the District Development Model, DDM. The DDM seeks to eliminate silos between government departments and the three spheres of government. A number of Ministers and Deputy Ministers and premiers who spoke here spoke about the efficacy of being able to work together and more particularly about the District Development Model because this system further aims to strengthen integrated planning and co-ordination, improving service delivery, eliminating fragmentation and ensuring inclusive and people-centred development in our country.

This system brings together national, provincial and local government, as well as stakeholders like organised business, labour and community organisations and in particular, districts to collectively address challenges. Where the DDM

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has been integrated into government operations and structures, it has already begun to make meaningful and measurable progress. For example, the work done by the Presidential eThekweni Working Group in line with the District Development Model approach has contributed to significant improvements in the city.

Once again eThekweni or Durban has become the tourist mecca of South Africa once again and it has attracted investors to come back not only to build hotels or to refurbish the very famous hotels along the beachfront, but it has also attracted many other businesses. By bringing national, provincial and local government together with business, labour, civil society and residents, we have seen improvements in the delivery of services like water and sanitation and the recovery of key industries, increased business sentiment and improved efficiency of the Durban Port. In the state of the nation address, I said that our Constitution calls on us to redress the injustices of the past, and to build a society that is equal and just.

We cannot do that, remembering that our marquee - the marquee objective of our Constitution, which is embedded in the

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opening lines of our Constitution, talks about redressing the injustices of the past. We cannot do that without transforming the various aspects of South African life, but more particularly the economy. It cannot be acceptable to anyone in this House for African people, coloured people and Indian people to be poorer and have fewer opportunities than white people. It cannot be acceptable, remembering that that was the order of the day in the past. It can therefore never - never, never, never - be acceptable that this should continue because that is what defined our life under apartheid: where it was legislated, where it was enforced through practice, protocol and convention, and where Africans, Indians and coloureds were forever denied by law to participate in the economy of the country.

It cannot be acceptable for anyone in this House to want women to earn less than men, own less than men and run fewer businesses than men. It is something that we simply must never accept. Yet there are people in this House - in the debate in this very House - who tell us to get rid of the very measures that have been put in place to correct the gross injustices of the past. It cannot be. [Applause.] It cannot be! We cannot accept that. They say we must rid our country of broad-based

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black economic empowerment, falsely claiming ...

[Interjections.]

The CHAIRPERSON OF THE NCOP: Order, hon members. Could you please allow the President to address the House. Order, hon members. [Interjections.] Hon members, could you please allow the President to address the House.

An HON MEMBER: Will the President take a question?

The CHAIRPERSON OF THE NCOP: He has been sitting there attentively, listening to your inputs. Now he is responding, and you are disturbing him. Please allow him an opportunity to address us. You may proceed, hon President.

Mr V ZUNGULA: We must call them out by name.

The PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC: Now I can see that this is leading to a lot of excitement. Can I finish, please?

[Interjections.] Can I finish? You know, this issue touches a very raw nerve in me because it is one of the principal issues that we sought to get rid of from this country - the inequality and the exclusion of black people from

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participating in the economy of the country. Now, so you know, Minister Mantashe and I interfaced with this issue so directly in the mining industry, where, by law, workers were divided. White workers who did exactly the same work as what black workers did would be advantaged and be given a certificate. What we call a blasting certificate. Black workers were denied getting a blasting certificate by law. White workers earn 10 times, if not more money, than black workers. And that was simply the disempowerment of black workers.

It is for this reason that it touches a raw nerve with people like me. And yet, the progress we have made since the introduction of the laws that we have put in place is undeniable. We have seen real changes in ownership patterns. We still need to see more, including businesses that are owned by women. We have seen changes in management control. We need to see more. We have seen enterprise development and skills development. It is no accident that between 2002 and 2023, black African households experience real income growth of 46%, coloured households 29% and Indian households 19%. It is no accident that the level of poverty in black African population fell by 67% in 2006 to 44% in 2023, nor is it accidental that

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the level of poverty in the coloured community fell from 43% to 25% in the same period.

Despite this progress, the average income of white households is still nearly five times higher than that of black African households. This is the gulf that we must close through deliberate and sustained efforts to expand opportunity. This is the gulf that we must close through the economic empowerment of those who were prevented from accessing those opportunities. Now is not the time to abandon black economic empowerment. [Applause.] Now is the time to make it even more effective. Just remember what our forebears who drafted the Freedom Charter. They said these freedoms we will fight for side by side throughout our lives until we have won our liberty. We should all be working together to ensure that we rid our country of the injustices of the past. Therefore, we must see broad-based black economic empowerment not as a cost to the economy, but as an investment in the sustainable growth of our economy.

That is why I announced in the state of the nation address that we are undertaking a review of broad-based black economic empowerment framework to ensure that it supports greater

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transformation and inclusive growth. During the course of this debate, Members of Parliament have spoken on behalf of their political parties. When they are out there in the streets, they obviously campaign for their political parties. But in Cabinet, there are no parties. There are no ANC, DA, IFP, PA, UDM, GOOD, FF Plus, PAC or Al Jama-ah Ministers. Every Minister and Deputy Minister is appointed by the President, not on a party-political basis. [Interjections.]

It is part of a collective working together to implement a common programme to Medium-Term Development Plan. So, no Minister or Deputy Minister should be publicly claiming their work in the Government of National Unity, GNU, as an achievement of their party. [Interjections.] In many cases, the basis for their achievements were laid before they even came into office. [Interjections.]

In many cases, the work that will also realise their objectives will be the work that we do together. Our successes and our achievements are the achievements of a collective. By the same measure, we are collectively responsible for our mistakes and our shortcomings.

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It is our commitment to the principle of partnership and shared responsibility that has made this Government of National Unity to work, and that will stand us in good stead for the work ahead. We are undertaking the various tasks that we have been given by our people in a global environment that is uncertain, unstable and that is rapidly changing.

During our presidency of the G20, we set out our clear vision and programme for a better, more inclusive and peaceful and more equal world. Most of the G20 countries overwhelmingly aligned themselves with the vision that South Africa put on the table. It is a vision that is shared by most members of the United Nations, Brics nations and the Non-Aligned Movement.

We will continue to work with like-minded countries on all available international platforms to advance that vision and to implement that programme. The African continent remains the centre of our foreign policy. South Africa is now the chair of Southern African Development Community, SADC, for the next two years and we will use that position to promote peace, integration and economic development in our region.

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We have also been elected to the African Union, AU Peace and Security Council. In this capacity, we will be working with other countries to promote peace efforts on the continent. At the AU Summit in Addis Ababa this past weekend, we chaired the Ad Hoc High-Level Committee on South Sudan, known as the C5, which is working to stabilise the situation in South Sudan, ensuring that elections take place and that a sustainable resolution to the conflict in that country is achieved.

The Deputy President, Paul Mashatile, has been my envoy in making sure that South Africa continues to be involved and lead the process of stabilising that country. We do this because a better Africa and a better world are in our national interest. At the same time, we are having to adapt very quickly to changing circumstances.

We cannot rely on the goodwill and fine sentiments of those who pronounce them on the world platform. That is why we are being more assertive in our trade policy, seeking out new markets and reaching trade agreements that support our growth and job creation efforts. We are intensifying our efforts to mobilise investments into our country and find investment opportunities for our businesses abroad. This relies on a

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stronger, more capable state. Our foreign missions must be focused on driving trade and investment. The Deputy President, Ministers and I will continue to scour various countries in the world, opening markets and reaching agreements.

We are working to ensure that our departments, from the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition to Agriculture, Mineral Resources, Tourism - are aligned around a common trade strategy. Amid the global turmoil, we have set a clear path to advance the interests of our country and its people. We must now pursue that path with even greater focus and vigour.

Thirty years ago, South Africans came together to craft a Constitution that has been dubbed as one of the very best constitutions in the world, which defines the values and the principles of our democracy. It places on it, and on us, a responsibility to correct the injustices of the past and to ensure that all people would progressively be able to exercise their right to housing, health care, food, water, social security and education.

As a nation, we have travelled far in giving effect to the promise of our Constitution. But we have much further to go.

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It is therefore fitting that this year, South Africans will once again come together to forge a vision for our country into the future and to agree on a programme of action that we need to achieve to make that vision alive. This is the year in which the national dialogue will reach every corner of our country.

This dialogue is led by a steering committee of more than 100 people representing 30 sectors of our society. It continues to be guided and inspired by the Eminent Persons Group of prominent South Africans drawn from many fields and backgrounds, who have all made a contribution to social cohesion and nation-building. It is ultimately the people of this country engaged in dialogue and united in action, who will determine the path our country takes.

Dialogue and partnership are essentially woven into the fabric and DNA of our society. They have enabled our country to overcome great difficulties, from the crime of apartheid to the political violence of our transition, to a devastating global pandemic and to a persistent energy crisis. It is the spirit that infuses the work of the Government of National Unity, that informs our approach to collaboration and co-

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ordination, that encourages us to draw on the resources and capabilities from across society and to solve difficult and almost at times, intractable problems.

It is dialogue and partnership that will take our country forward. It is the people of South Africa working together, who will sustain the momentum of our recovery and who will accelerate progress to an inclusive economy and a transformed society. As I conclude, I want to extend my gratitude to the Deputy President, Paul Mashatile, for his support and leadership that he continues to provide to me and to government for all the work that we do together. [Applause.]

I want to thank Ministers and Deputy Ministers for diligently implementing the actions that are contained in the Medium-Term Development Plan. [Applause.] The Deputy President and I are currently spending considerable amount of time evaluating Ministers and Deputy Ministers as well as their directors-general. This is part of an effort to promote accountability, engender a culture of performance and ensure action.

I am grateful to the leaders of the political parties in the Government of National Unity who I meet regularly to discuss

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matters of national interest. Their contributions have been very useful in managing the challenges our country faces. Hon members, I thank all of you who have participated in this debate and who are present here. As the elected representatives of the people of South Africa, we have much to do. Now is the time for action, for greater effort and for faster progress. Together and in unity we can do it.

Last year I spoke about the imagery of weaver birds that work together to build their nest. Today I want to end by using another imagery of beavers who work together to build their own nest, but they do much more than that. Beavers are like a team of engineers. They work together to fell branches, pack mud houses, raise dams and lodges and create a safe neighbourhood of deep water around their home. Beavers are a reminder that real building is rarely a solo act. Think of a river that runs too fast, that is too exposed, too uncertain - one beaver cannot change it, but a community of beavers can do so.

They don't wait for perfect conditions; they start with what's in reach. One drags a branch, another places it, others pack mud and strengthen the weak points. Bit by bit they raise a

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wall, build a dam, and shape a lodge - not as a monument, but as a home. What does that teamwork create? It creates not just a structure, but a safer environment - calmer waters, protection from danger, and space for life to grow. Their work turns risk into refuge. It doesn't happen through noise or ego, it happens through co-ordination, consistency, a shared purpose and co-operation. That's what working together looks like. And that's how it should be.

We don't all have the same role, but every role matters. Some people plan; some people lift; some people reinforce, and some people spot the leaks early and fix them before they become disasters. When we build like that - patiently, practically, together - we don't just complete a project; we complete and create a neighbourhood.

We create a nation, a place where others can thrive because we choose to co-operate and work together. So, let's build like beavers - with urgency, with unity and with the quiet determination to make something strong - strong enough to hold, something that lasts and something that shelters more than just ourselves. Let us be the real builders, hon members. Let us be the real builders of South Africa, working together

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like we are in the Government of National Unity. Thank you very much. [Applause.] [Interjections.]

The SPEAKER: Order, hon members. On behalf of the National Council of Provinces and myself, I would like to thank the President for responding to the debate. I also thank the hon members for their participation during the past two days and even today. I just want to remind members once again to observe our Rules - our Joint Rules, particularly if the two Houses are in session, but also when our Houses are sitting separately. Let's remember the Rules we have agreed to. Again, I would once more ask that when members have not been recognised, they should refrain from activating their microphones to speak because it disturbs those who are making inputs on the podium.

While interjection is allowed, let's also try and respect one another so that people can be heard. Today you have just been so wonderful, and I really like to thank all of you for having been the best members in this session. Now we have come to the end of our business. [Interjections.]

The Joint Sitting adjourned at 15:26.