ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF TRANSPORT MS DIPUO PETERS, ON THE OCCASION OF THE OPENING OF THE ROAD AND BRIDGE LINKING SWARTKOPFONTEIN AND RAMOTSWA BORDER POST BETWEEN SOUTH AFRICA AND BOTSWANA

07 November 2016

Programme Director,

Members of the Executive Councils of Transport and Community Safety

Members of the Provincial Legislatures

Your Worship, the Mayors and Members of the Mayoral Committees

Magosi

Baruti le baetapele ba Kereke

Distinguished representatives of local government

Acting Director-General of the Department of Transport
Provincial Heads of the Departments of Transport and Roads

Representatives of the State Owned Companies and agencies

Members of the media

Ladies and gentlemen

The opening of the Swartkopfontein road and bridge linking South Africa and Botswana should be a celebratory occasion, more so, at a time in global history where populist movements in other parts of the world are clamouring for restrictions on the movement of people and the building of walls to isolate and separate communities who live in the same region.

This whole project of the road and bridge construction cost R78.5 Million, and 51 full time jobs were created over the 23 month contract period. The labour was sourced between the two countries with most of the construction material used coming from Botswana.

We build bridges in the spirit of the great Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela who spoke of a continent of Africa "that is at peace with itself." A united Africa "where its leaders combine in its efforts to solve the problems of this continent."

Thus, at a time when some countries in the North are dreaming up schemes to build physical walls to separate neighbours and raising barbed wire fences to keep people out, we are standing in a small village in rural Southern Africa to celebrate the construction of a road and bridge that connects communities and opens up opportunities for people.

But, programme director, there are many other reasons to commemorate the significance of this new bridge and improved border post. A little more than a
month ago the people of Botswana celebrated their golden jubilee, marking exactly 50 years since independence from colonial Britain.

This was a tumultuous period in the history of Africa and Botswana when it became one of the leading countries on the continent to shake off the shackles of colonialism and embrace an independent future. By doing this you invigorated the broader liberation struggle and inspired a generation of young South Africans to fight for similar freedoms, even though we were only able to realise this goal almost three decades later.

While Botswana was celebrating its half century of freedom South Africans were commemorating our own heritage with a special emphasis this year on the rich legacy and qualities bequeathed to us by the late Oliver Reginald Tambo, the longest serving President of the African National Congress and one of the prime architects of our country’s democratic transition.

And in the same way in which this bridge across the Notwane River connects the people of Botswana and South Africa, the towering figure of O R Tambo serves as an historical link between our two countries stretching back almost six decades.

Programme director,

At a time during the darkest days of apartheid repression the people of Botswana gave refuge to the leaders of our liberation movements – both ANC and PAC – who were in danger of being arrested, imprisoned, tortured and even executed for their dreams of establishing a free and democratic South Africa.

Botswana was the obvious first destination for President Tambo when, in 1960, he received instructions from the African National Congress to establish the
organisation in exile. He spent some time in Serowe before moving further north to Tanzania to set up a more permanent base.

In the years that followed Botswana became known as the “pipeline” for activists who mostly moved from Zeerust to find safe haven in Lobatse before flying out to join the liberation movements in other parts of Africa.

One such activist was our own former President, Thabo Mbeki, who described his experience at a function to honour the legacy of his former colleague, President Ketumile Masire:

“Fifty years ago Botswana established itself in my own consciousness as a vital bridge between apartheid South Africa… and liberated Africa,” he said. “As such a bridge it was inevitable that Botswana would have to carry a particular historic burden.”

Programme Director,

Another prominent figure who benefited from the hospitality of Botswana was the distinguished academic, Prof Z K Matthews, who lectured to both President Seretse Khama and President Tambo at the University of Fort Hare. Prof Matthews is widely regarded as the primary author of South Africa’s Freedom Charter and later in life, after leaving for exile, he was appointed as Botswana’s first Ambassador to the United States of America.

My colleague and comrade, Premier Supra Mahumapelo, the Premier of the North West Province of South Africa which hosts us today honoured this link last year when he established an exchange programme between students of our two countries in the name of Prof Z K Matthews.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Through the decades Botswana managed this burden as a frontline state in the liberation of South Africa at great risk to the lives and properties of its citizens and to the detriment of its economy. Successive governments led by your founding president, Sir Seretse Khama and Dr Ketumile Masire, had to withstand immense economic, diplomatic and military pressure to support the liberation struggle and sustain the legitimate political and economic aspirations of people in the region.

Looking back on this period we can recall the many instances when apartheid security forces crossed this very border where we are meeting today to attack, maim and kill families or assassinate political activists.

The callous murder of Ongopotse Tiro – killed with a letter bomb – the numerous attacks on United Nations Refugee camps near Francistown and the infamous raid on Gaborone in June 1985, which killed 12 people, including a six-year old child, are but some of the examples of the terror acts committed by the apartheid forces.

The role of Botswana as a frontline state in the struggle against apartheid can never be underestimated. And South Africa’s gratitude was best reflected in the decision by President Nelson Mandela to undertake his very first visit outside of South Africa, after his release from 27 years in prison, to the frontline states where he thanked the leaders and the citizens of the countries for their sacrifices. Since then the relations between South Africa and Botswana has grown and prospered. We share membership of the African Union, the Southern African Development Community and the Southern African Customs Union.

Annual trade between our two countries have grown steadily since the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1994 and the streamlining of travel
regulations and border procedures are contributing to the free movement of people and goods across our borders. Millions of South Africans have family ties or close cultural ties with communities in Botswana – especially in this province and my own home province of the Northern Cape.

Programme Director,

The opening of this road and bridge to link the border posts of Swartkopfontein and Ramotswa takes us another step further to make the movement between citizens of our countries so much easier and strengthen our cultural and economic ties.

It flows from a memorandum of agreement that we signed in July 2014 in which the governments of our two countries agreed to promote cross-border trade, economic activity and regional integration.

Part of the agreement included a practical initiative to upgrade roads, bridges and other physical infrastructure. The Swartkopfontein entry point is located between the commercial border posts of Kopfontein and Skilpadshek and now offers a convenient alternative for commuters who make the journey. I have no doubt that it will relieve the pressure on traffic between Zeerust in South Africa and the towns of Gaborone, Lobatse and Ramotswa in Botswana.

This will lead to a safer travel experience for commuters within the region. I want to use this opportunity at the start of summer season to call on road users in both our countries to keep safety uppermost in their minds when they travel during the festive period.

We through SANRAL are doing a commendable job in providing modern transport infrastructure. However, we have to combine this with more responsible
behaviour by road users – motorist, truck drivers, bus operators and pedestrians – to bring down the unacceptable high crash rate and fatalities on our roads.

Programme Director,

I want to congratulate SANRAL and the contractors for their delivery on a well-planned and well-executed programme. The road was upgraded from a gravel to an asphalt surface and includes the construction of the 80-meter long Notwane River Bridge. This bridge was designed for a one in fifty year flood, meaning once in fifty years it might top. This might seem to be a superfluous design if we consider the current drought conditions – but residents will well remember that this border post has to be closed in December 2013 because of the heavy rains which caused a flood in the Notwane River.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here when we open a new chapter in the relationship between South Africa and Botswana and to speak at this event where we unveil the infrastructure that will contribute to the growth of trade, commerce and regional integration.

Speaking at his first meeting of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) as head of state, in 1994, President Nelson Mandela, again referred to the contribution of frontline countries such as Botswana to the liberation of the people of South Africa – and said:

“Africa shed her blood and surrendered the lives of her children so that all her children could be free. She gave of her limited wealth and resources so that all of Africa should be liberated. She opened her heart of hospitality and her head so full of wise counsel, so that we shall emerge victorious.”

This road, bridge and border post stand as tangible examples of what have been achieved when neighbours in the region decide to work together rather than
putting up barriers. It is also highly significant for us as the transport sector that on the eve of the BNC of our two countries, we should be opening the bridge between our two countries.

I thank you.

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