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NAPTOSA STATEMENT ON STATE OF THE NATION ADDRESS 2021

We did not envy the President having to deliver the State of the Nation Address (SONA) 2021 following a year like 2020 and an immediate future than seems as bleak, said Mr Nkosipendule Ntantala, President of NAPTOSA.

We, however, pity the President even more for the contributions he receives from ministries for the SONA, some of which are often removed from reality. The Minister for Public Service and Administration's input being a case in point.

Pursuing a professional public service is a noble vision and NAPTOSA, as a signatory to the Public Service Charter, is a staunch supporter thereof, said Mr Ntantala. But how does one cultivate professionalism in a workforce when reality indicates that the employer does not care for its own employees as was so profoundly displayed in 2020 when the employer reneged on implementing the agreed wage adjustment?

NAPTOSA does not purport to be an expert in energy matters, but our members are citizens that regularly have to contend with the pain of the country's energy crisis. Hardly an evening passes without a warning on TV that the energy network is under pressure, if not severe pressure – that is the reality. The Ministry of Energy's input to the SONA, painting a picture of progress at ESKOM, and for better days to come, is therefore astounding and emphasizes why we should pity the President who has to present this to the nation.

It was a welcome change to hear the President saying that the focus of the SONA would be to report on progress in implementation of the economic recovery plan and not to make promises as is usually the case with the Address. In the current compromised climate it would have been foolish to make promises, although the President unavoidably referred to actions and plans that are being contemplated (tantamount to promises).

It is difficult to comment on the economic recovery progress report because some of the activities in the four identified priority areas appear to be happening "under the radar", such as the massive rollout of infrastructure throughout the country as well as the increase in local production. We do not often hear of, or see, activities in these areas. Only time will tell whether the progress reported are for real.

While the employment stimulus to create jobs and support livelihoods, that have ostensibly already created 430 000 opportunities, is commendable, the opportunities unfortunately do not translate into sustainable jobs. The fact that 1,7 million regular jobs had been lost between the first and third quarters of last year indicates that the creation of sustainable jobs should be government's priority.

As for the priority of rapidly expanding our energy generation capacity, most people will agree that this has not been a success. The President referred in his Address to the historic Eskom Social Compact signed in December 2020 between government and its social partners and which outlines the necessary actions to meet the country's energy needs now and into the future. NAPTOSA was not party to this Compact and has no issue with it as long as it does not involve using GEPF funds to prop up ESKOM, said Mr Ntantala.

Minimal attention was given to education in the President's speech, other than it being government's priority to regain lost time and improve educational outcomes. NAPTOSA is fully aligned to these priorities but hopes to see concrete plans announced in the Minister of Basic Education's Budget Vote Speech to take our education system forward, because if education stagnates it could have far reaching implications for the country in the long term.

NAPTOSA agrees with the view that corruption is one of the greatest impediments to the country's growth and development and we note the steps that have been taken to strengthen law enforcement agencies in their fight against corruption. However, until we see these steps translate into convictions of perpetrators, anti-corruption actions will remain hollow efforts, said Mr Ntantala. This was strikingly demonstrated by the corruption that occurred in the procurement of COVID-19 protective gear and materials amidst all the focus that corruption is receiving from government quarters.

We welcome the President's report on progress regarding youth employment and the battle against Gender-based Violence. Both these issues lie close to NAPTOSA's heart.

As expected, COVID-19 received a fair amount of attention in the President's speech. While the vaccine roll-out has hit a serious snag, it was comforting to learn that South Africa has now managed to secure vaccines that are considered to be effective against the strain of the virus in our country. May we see a smooth, effective, non-corruption affected, roll-out process in which education staff are next in line behind the health workers to receive the vaccines, said Mr Ntantala.

Enquiries: Mr Nkosipendule Ntantala (President) – 072 198 0599

Mr Basil Manuel (Executive Director) - 079 508 62