



## ***Response***

***14th December 2022***

### **Load Shedding: An Honest Answer at Last**

In recent weeks, as load-shedding has intensified, there has been a growing narrative seeking to blame Eskom, and specifically its management, for the crisis. At the governing party's National Executive Committee meeting last Friday, some members argued that the company's Chief Executive, Andre de Ruyter, should be dismissed; as a lawyer, rather than an engineer, he supposedly lacked the necessary skills to solve Eskom's problems.

Gwede Mantashe, in his capacity as Minister of Minerals and Energy, has gone further, stating wildly that "by not attending to load-shedding Eskom is agitating to overthrow the state." Even some of his more responsible and sober-minded cabinet colleagues have, at least obliquely, insinuated that Eskom is either exaggerating the level of load-shedding needed, or that it somehow has the capacity to supply power without being able to purchase diesel for its emergency open-cycle turbines.

Thus, Pravin Gordhan, Minister of Public Enterprises, announced last Thursday that he had directed the Board of Eskom "to meet and act with a great sense of urgency in order to ensure that the management of Eskom gets the country out of level six load-shedding with immediate effect." Exactly how Eskom was supposed to get us out of level six immediately, Mr Gordhan did not explain.

And his finance colleague, Enoch Godongwana, adopted a similar line the next day, saying that the Treasury would not come to Eskom's assistance in the purchasing of more diesel. "Eskom did not apply for funding through the budget process and Eskom management should therefore take all necessary steps to ensure they secure the diesel needed to avert severe load shedding." Again, there is no explanation as to how Eskom's current management can be expected to budget ahead of time for contingencies caused by the failure of the obsolete, ill-maintained, and quite possibly sabotaged, coal power stations that it has inherited; nor of what other 'steps' they can take to get the diesel they need in order to avoid even higher levels of load-shedding.

These are all attempts, some more egregious than others, to place the blame for the load-shedding crisis on Eskom, and especially on its current leadership team. The political reason for this is abundantly clear: according to one report of the NEC meeting, those pushing for Mr de Ruyter's dismissal "argued that it was inevitable that the ANC would be punished for Eskom's failures."<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, though, not everyone in ANC leadership pushes this convenient narrative. Characteristically, it is President Cyril Ramaphosa himself who has spoken most candidly and honestly about the origins of the crisis. He did so on a campaign visit in Cape Town over the weekend.

"Eskom has been subjected to a number of challenges over a number of years. One of those is that Eskom was denied the... well, let me put it this way... was told not to build power stations. It was later realised that actually, we need power stations, and we woke up much too late and started building mega-power stations like Medupi and Kusile... And we now have paid double, more than double the money we should have paid for our new power stations, and the old ones have been ageing more rapidly, and maintenance programmes were stopped."<sup>2</sup>

Mr Ramaphosa’s remarks explain the situation in a nutshell. When Eskom warned the government in the late 1990s that, without the installation of major new generation capacity, power cuts would become inevitable, its warnings were ignored. And when, in his words, the government “woke up” and approved the construction of new power stations, it ended up paying “more than double” for them, due to corruption and mismanagement. Finally, during the state capture era, vital maintenance programmes were stopped in order to give the impression that things were under control; when, in fact, the problems were merely being kicked down the road.

These admissions are important not only as far as Eskom is concerned. If Mr Ramaphosa and his ministers could all be similarly honest and open about the causes of our numerous other economic and governance problems, it would become much easier for all the various role-players to join in efforts to address them. Then, sustainable and consensus-based solutions might begin to emerge for the impending collapse of Transnet and the Post Office, the mess at PRASA, the multi-billion Rand hole that is SAA; not to mention the wider crises of unemployment and poverty.

Instead though, as long as this kind of admission is the exception, and Mr Mantashe’s kind of baseless and self-serving allegations remain the rule, solutions will elude us.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/yckszmuc>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/relax-theres-no-issue-ramaphosa-on-phala-phala-20221210>



The Democracy & Governance Project of the CPLO is supported by the Hanns Seidel Foundation (HSF). The opinions and statements contained in CPLO’s publications do not necessarily reflect the views of the HSF.

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