

# New bridge opens 24 years after Butterworth tragedy

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TWENTY-FOUR years after 11 passengers travelling in a bakkie were swept to their deaths while crossing a flooded, low-lying bridge near a Butterworth village, the government has finally built a safe bridge across the Cerhu river.

This was in response to pleas from the community, said campaigners.

Residents' emotions were laid bare when Public Works Minister Nkosi-nathi Nhleko unveiled a memorial stone at the Cerhu Bridge 7km outside Butterworth yesterday.

Nhleko, with roads and public works MEC Mandisa Marawu, Mnquma mayor Thobeka Bikitsha and MP Nomawethu Gqiba, said although the bridge was in use, the official opening would be reserved for President Jacob Zuma.

Nhleko said South Africa had not yet attained total liberation because most rural areas lacked development. "It is still the rural areas whose people are still victims of flooding and drownings, like this tragedy. We are

speeding up development and trying to improve our road infrastructure like bridges. But this will not happen overnight as we are still correcting the wrongs of more than 300 years of apartheid and colonial regime."

He urged people and traditional leaders to work with the government to develop rural areas.

Members of the community fought back tears as they recalled September 2 1993. Teacher Mzalwana Qutu, 57, and tavern owner Bennett Vamva, 55, both lost their wives.

Teacher Ziyanda Qutu, 26, and Nophelo Matutu-Vamva, 27, perished in the disaster, leaving their husbands with young children to raise.

Mzalwana Qutu's younger brother, Mendu, 26, also drowned in the accident. He was left with the couple's four-month-old girl, Zizo. The couple had been married for five years.

Vamva, married in 1988, was left with four children to bring up. The youngest, Lwandiso, was two.

"This bridge reminds me of my wife and my brother's deaths. Whenever crossing it I say a short prayer in her memory, because her death devas-

tated me and my family," said Qutu.

Despite the long wait to have it built, the families expressed their joy over the new infrastructure.

Vamva has kept a clipping of the Daily Dispatch report about the disaster. "It is still in my mind how I found my wife trapped between rocks at this bridge," he said.

The bridge connects the four villages of Bawa, Mqambeli, Mthintsi-lana and Cerhu to Butterworth.

Community members braved the wet and cold weather yesterday to witness the minister unveiling the memorial stone for the victims.

The new bridge, part of the Rural Bailey Bridges programme, was built through a partnership between the Public Works Department and the defence force. A Bailey bridge is a prefabricated truss-bridge that is manually assembled by connecting panels end-to-end.

The new bridge was built from stock of old military Bailey bridges used in World War 2. A total of 40 people, including families of the victims, were hired during its construction. — [lulamilef@dispatch.co.za](mailto:lulamilef@dispatch.co.za)