

Speech by Namibian Minister Hon Jerry Ekandjo on the Occasion of the Handover of 21 Human Remains of Namibian Origin

Berlin, 05 March 2014. Statement by Hon Jerry Ekandjo, Minister of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture speaking about German colonialism, its connection with racial science and the current importance of repatriation of the Namibian skulls.

Dear Prof Einhäupl, Chairman of the Executive Board Charité – University Medicine Berlin; Ambassador Egon Kochanke, Director General for Sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel region in the Federal Foreign Office; Your Excellency Neville Gertze, Ambassador of the Republic of Namibia to the Federal Republic of Germany; Distinguished Members of Academia; Representatives of the Media, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hold in the highest regard the mission I have been entrusted, to lead to the Federal Republic of Germany, a Namibian delegation mandated with repatriating the human remains of Namibian sons and daughters who fell victim to the atrocities committed against our people at the turn of the previous century.

More than two years have passed since September 2011 when my predecessor led a delegation to Berlin to collect and repatriate the first Namibian human remains from the Federal Republic of Germany. These human remains were removed from Namibia and taken to Imperial Germany to serve the racial science of the day aimed at proving the supposed inferiority of Africans.



It was due to a TV report in the political show “fakt”, which presented pictures of human remains in the archives of the Charité and the University of Freiburg in 2008 that we in Namibia – for the first time – had proof of what we suspected for many years, and subsequently demanded the return of these remains. The Charité University Hospital in Berlin was the first German institution to hand over human remains of Namibian origin. Today, my delegation and I are back in Berlin to receive and return to Namibia the remains of 21 men, women and children, marking the second repatriation.

We take a moment to pause and reflect with great sorrow on the darkest chapter in the history between Namibia and Germany. At the same time, however, today provides us with an opportunity to learn from this painful history and commemorate the victims of colonialism. We honour their sacrifice and commit ourselves to pursuing justice and reconciliation for them and future generations.

The 21 Namibian men, women and children before us were not only martyrs in the struggle for justice, but also victims of racially motivated brutality and subjugation under German colonialism. As we repatriate their mortal remains to their motherland, it is our belief that in being reunited

with their ancestors and descendants, their souls will be at peace and they finally will be accorded the dignity they deserve.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The atrocities committed in Namibia during the period of German colonial rule were despicable, callous and racist in nature and will thus always be regarded by all Namibians as crimes against humanity. The name of science was used as a pretext for the many unjust acts committed against deceased Namibian martyrs. It is unthinkable that heads were severed from bodies, and in some instances, whole skeletons unearthed for so-called research purposes. I am sure that you will agree with me that these practices were not only unjust, but also inhumane.

Very often I am asked what the value of repatriation processes is to Namibia and why the government has chosen to prioritise the desire of the affected communities to have human remains of Namibian origin repatriated. The response is simple; although many of the human remains are today "nameless", these are brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters whose dignity, and that of their communities, has been violated. For the Namibian Government, it is therefore, of paramount importance that we fulfil the moral and ethical obligation to continue the search for human remains in German institutions in order to ensure their safe return to Namibia.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We may recall that in 2011, H.E Hifikepunye Pohamba, the President of the Republic of Namibia, called on German institutions to hand over both human remains and cultural objects of significant historic value to Namibia. I would like to acknowledge and appreciate the cooperation we have received from the Charité University Medicine Berlin in this regard. The provenance work on these human remains has been completed and we are pleased to receive the remains.

We recognise that there is a world of difference between the scientific works that the Charité Human Remains Project under the able leadership of Prof. Thomas Schnalke and Dr. Andreas Winkelmann with their team have done in terms of the provenance research and the so-called "scientific research of the time" which was nothing more than racially motivated. In that context, we wish to put on record our appreciation for the efforts of Prof. Einhäupl and the entire Human Remains Project-Team to assist in verifying the origins of the remains we are able to repatriate today.

We regret that not more German institutions have researched their archives in order to identify and return human remains of Namibian origin. It is for this reason that I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the call of His Excellency President Pohamba and request all German institutions (especially museums) to continue searching their collections for human remains and any cultural artefacts that may have significant historic value to Namibians. Our Embassy in Berlin is aptly prepared for dialogue with these institutions and is willing to assist in all preparations for repatriating both human remains and cultural objects to Namibia.

Against that background, we wish to recognize with appreciation the support and cooperation we had from the Federal Foreign Office in approaching over 200 institutions under the roof of the German Museums'

Association (Deutscher Museumsbund) in a joint letter, asking them to screen their archives for possible human remains of Namibian origin. The process is still ongoing and as such, no concrete results can be shared with the public as yet.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We all know that genuine peace and reconciliation requires open dialogue, acknowledgement of the truth and forgiveness. Forgiveness however, does not mean that these acts will not remain etched in our memories. These human remains in a gruesome way bear witness to the unthinkable disregard for African lives and the sustained efforts to annihilate African peoples by the highest authorities of the German Empire in its quest for colonial power.

The Government of the Republic of Namibia stands firmly with the descendants of all the victims of these truly horrific crimes. These crimes have been recognised globally as the first genocide of the 20th Century.

We also take note with appreciation that at the time there were voices amongst the German people such as August Bebel, the leader of the Social Democrats, who protested strongly against the war of extermination and the atrocities committed by the Schutztruppe. We are pleased that such voices of conscience, courage and human decency continue to prevail in modern day Germany, both in civil society and politics. It is our belief that with collective efforts, the German people as a whole will face up to the challenge of properly recognizing past wrongs and commit themselves to supporting the call for justice and true reconciliation.

I would like to make use of this opportunity and thank all those NGOs, MPs, and private individuals for their long-standing and unwavering support to the Namibian affected communities and the Namibian government in bringing light to this dark chapter of our joint history.

As we continue on the journey to bring honour, dignity and justice to the victims of the brutality and mass murder of yesteryear's colonial regimes, let us remind ourselves and teach our children and future generations that racism in all its facets is evil and a crime against humanity. Ignoring the past will not make it go away. Our people deserve respect and justice.

I would like to thank you, Prof. Einhäupl, for making this second handover possible. It is my hope that we can build on the relations that have been created in this period and I hope that we can explore cooperation between Charité University Medicine Berlin and institutions of higher learning in Namibia, as we endeavour to build bridges of peace between generations of Namibian and German youth who are fortunate to have a different basis for their interaction.

I thank you.

Speech the 05 March 2014,
Charité University Medicine,
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