



Statement of Neville Gertze
Ambassador of the Republic of Namibia
on the Occasion of Unveiling the Memorial Stone
in Honour of the Victims of German Colonial Rule in Namibia
Friday, 02 October 2009,
Garnisonsfriedhof Neukölln, Berlin
Columbiadamm 122 -124

Mr. Buschkowsky, Mayor of the District of Neukölln,

Mr. Lieber, Secretary of State of the Senate Administration of Justice, Berlin,

Dr. Manig, Head of the Division Southern Africa in the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

Representatives of the Africa Council, the Berlin Development Policy Round Table (BER), the Initiative Black Germans (ISD), Berlin Post-Kolonial, p.art.ners, SODI, Werkstatt der Kulturen,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

Today, we have gathered here on the occasion of the unveiling of a memorial stone commemorating the victims of German colonial rule in Namibia from 1884-1915, in particular the colonial war of 1904-1907 – a war in which the German so-called “Schutztruppe” committed unspeakable crimes against the

Ovaherero, the Nama and the Damara in what was known as Deutsch-Südwest Afrika.

The uprising against the colonial troops by the Ovaherero in 1904, and later by the Nama in Central and Southern Namibia, culminated in the genocide of the Ovaherero in August of the same year in what became known as the Battle at the Ohamakari.

General von Trotha ordered that “the nation (i.e. the Ovaherero) should be annihilated”, and declared that it would be “most appropriate that the nation perishe(d)”. He emphasised, and I quote: “(The Ovaherero) have to perish in the Sandveld or try to cross the Bechuanaland border.”¹

Even though present day historians differ on the question of the number of people killed, we do know that this determination to annihilate the Ovaherero resulted in the extermination of between 60.000 – 80.000 people and the near extinction of the Ovaherero nation.

The few that survived were captured, often executed or confined in concentration camps. They suffered unspeakably as forced labourers, and died slow and painful deaths from undernourishment and as a result of exploitation.

Jan Kubas, an eyewitness of the events in the Omaheke and Kalahari in an interview in 1918, said: “Words cannot be found to relate what happened; it was too terrible”; and a Herero woman who survived the desert later refused to describe her hardship, stating that “the wind ha(d) blown sand over the footprints and tears”.²

You may ask yourself why I am telling you all this 105 years later?

It is not only because we are here to unveil a memorial stone in honour of the victims of German colonial rule and the genocide, but also

- to strengthen our resolve never to repeat the mistakes of history:

¹ von Trotha Archives, 315; Abschrift der Tagebücher mit Anlagen & Materialsammlung: p.73, 74

² Great Britain, Report on the Natives of South West Africa and their Treatment by Germany, HMSO, London, August, 1918: p.65; Neitz, J. Die Herero betreffend. Reise zu Samuel Maharero, Makapaanspoort on 8 Nov, 1907, ELCIN II.5.14. quoted in Silvester, Jeremy & Gewalt, Jan-Bart, Words Cannot Be Found – German Colonial Rule in Namibia; An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book, 2003: p. xiii

In order to know where we are going, we have to know where we are coming from. The enormous pain and the hurt caused by this colonial war needs to be dealt with even 105 years later.

- We should also remember that history is never just another closed chapter, because time is a perpetual continuum, or as William Faulkner once said: "The past is not dead. In fact, it is not even past"; and one of your great novelists – **die Berlinerin Christa Wolf – fügte hinzu: "Wir trennen uns ab und stellen uns fremd."** ("We detach it (the past) from ourselves and pretend to be strangers.")³

As we draw our lessons from this dark chapter in our joint history, I am pleased to note that today's Namibian-German relationship has over the last 20 years been marked by a partnership of mutual understanding and close cooperation.

This we should not take for granted. Our future cooperation should continue to focus on bringing our two peoples ever closer together and fostering a stronger bond of friendship and understanding in order to restore the confidence that was lost.

The memorial stone that is being unveiled here today – with all its perfection or imperfection, with all its inclusions or omissions – must not only serve to remind us of the scars of history, but it should also inspire us to look to the future with determined resolve to help uncover those footprints, those tears blown over by the sand, and to bring about a new era of cooperation and reconciliation.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Namibian Government remains deeply committed to help facilitate a process that contributes to genuine reconciliation and harmony, firstly within us and our society, and secondly between Namibia and its international partners.

While we have already made great strides towards the reconciliation process, we should note that both within Namibia as well as between Namibia and Germany, this is an ongoing process, which requires us to continue working together and building stronger bridges on a firm foundation of the principles of

³ William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun; and Christa Wolf, Kindheitsmuster, p.1

reconciliation, peace, justice, development, and prosperity for our future generations.

In order to foster better understanding and mutual respect the Speaker of the Namibian National Assembly, Dr. Theo-Ben Gurirab, during his official visit to Germany in 2007, suggested the establishment of an Inter-Parliamentary Dialogue Forum, in which issues of interest and concern between our two nations could be discussed amongst the people's representatives.

To that extend, we appreciate the efforts in the German Parliament in 2008, which lead to an introduction of a motion in support of this initiative. We hope this important initiative will continue to enjoy support in the new Bundestag.

It should be clear that all sides who would engage in such an inter-parliamentary dialogue forum would do so on the understanding that dealing with this aspect of our joint past, i.e. the colonial period, is but one item on the agenda, however a very important one. In the long-term, it would contribute to further strengthening the bilateral relations between Namibia and Germany.

In other words, by coping with the past, we would allow for the development of a deeper, richer and more meaningful relationship in the future.

I wish to recognize the support and commitment of the German people and Government to assist the various Namibian communities to overcome the legacies of the past and the present hardships. These initiatives play an instrumental role in addressing the social and economic development challenges in Namibia.

Sehr geehrter Herr Bürgermeister Buschkowsky,

On behalf of the Namibian Government, I would like to express our appreciation for the efforts of the **Bezirks Verordneten Versammlung und des Bezirksamtes Neukölln** in setting up this memorial stone, commemorating the victims of German colonial rule in Namibia from 1884-1915, and specifically the victims of the war of extermination from 1904-1907.

A great philosopher once said: "A journey of a thousand miles begins beneath one's feet".

In that spirit I call on all of us today – politicians and school children, diplomats and NGOs, teachers and the common man and woman in society – to join forces and continue from here on this important journey.

I thank you very much.