

-- Check against delivery! --

Speech by the Regional Director for Sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel on the occasion of the repatriation of human remains

Windhoek, 7 March 2014

Honourable Juliet Kavetuna, Master of Ceremonies and Member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Namibia,

Your Excellency Dr. Hifikepunye Pohamba, President of the Republic of Namibia,

Your Excellency Dr. Sam Nujoma, Founding President and Father of the Nation,

Right Honourable Hage G. Geingob, Prime Minister of the Republic of Namibia,

Honourable Dr. Theo-Ben Guirirab, Speaker of the National Assembly of the Republic of Namibia,

Honourable Asser Kapere, Chairperson of the National Council of the Republic of Namibia,

Honourable Marco Hausiku, Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Namibia,

Honourable Jerry Ekandjo Minister of Youth, National Service, Sports and Culture of the Republic of Namibia,

Honourable Members of the Cabinet of the Government of the Republic of Namibia,

Honourable Members of the National Assembly of the Republic of Namibia,

Honourable Members of the National Council of the Republic of Namibia,

Your Excellency, Chief Immanuel Gaseb, Deputy Chairperson of the Council of Traditional Leaders in Namibia,

Your Excellencies, Chiefs and Leaders of Traditional Authorities and Groups of the Republic of Namibia,

Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

Distinguished Members of the Media,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Namibia and Germany are linked by a long, shared history. Together we remember joyful events, such as Namibia gaining independence in 1990. However, we are also united in our remembrance of the extremely difficult start of the special relations between our countries during the period of colonial rule. In particular, memories of the brutal colonial war from 1904 to 1908 with its countless victims fills us today – in both Namibia and Germany – with profound sadness and sympathy for those who suffered.

As a former German Ambassador to Windhoek and the Federal Foreign Office's current Regional Director for Sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel, I am aware of the great importance of this day for Namibians and for the future process of mutual understanding between our peoples. It is very important to me to play a part in this second repatriation of human remains on behalf of the German Government. I would like to thank the Namibian Government for our good cooperation in the weeks of preparation and most especially the Namibian delegation led by His Excellency Jerry Ekandjo, the Minister of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture, who made this repatriation possible.

There were formal ceremonies in Freiburg and Berlin this past week. The remains of 35 individuals were handed over to the Namibian delegation. The scientists involved in this operation told us that these people belonged to all of the main ethnic groups in Namibia. They were Damara, Herero, Nama, Ovambo and San, men and women, adults and children. It is thought that some of them died during the terrible colonial war or in detention or concentration camps. Some died of natural causes, many due to acts of violence. In many cases, the circumstances surrounding the deaths are unknown.

Although our generation cannot undo the sins, mistakes or crimes of our forefathers, we do have a shared responsibility in the light of our history for shaping our future. These victims remind us to extend our hands to one another and to treat each other with respect. I, too, bow before these individuals, who for so long were denied a dignified burial in accordance with the customs of their ethnic groups. And I share your satisfaction that the long journey these remains have travelled is now over.

This is the second repatriation of human remains from Germany to Namibia. Many people ask why this process is so lengthy and how many more sets of human remains will need to be repatriated. No-one can give a conclusive answer to these legitimate questions at present. However, I would like to take this opportunity to assure all of you that the German Government unreservedly supports the repatriation process. We will keep on working with you to ensure that all human remains from the period of colonial rule are repatriated.

This will continue to require intensive provenance research, for the descendants and relatives of these deceased have a right to expect that only human remains whose Namibian provenance has been proven without doubt are handed over to them. This

process is expensive and time-consuming. Only too often, there is a lack of detailed information on the remains after such a long time. Moreover, parts of the collections and some documents were destroyed – especially during the Second World War. The institutions concerned must therefore set up special research projects to examine the provenance of human remains using anthropological and historical methods.

Raising the necessary sensitivity for repatriation in Germany took some time. However, we are now on the right path. Namibian and German agencies are in close contact with each other and with various research institutions and museums in Germany. We will plan the next steps together.

It cannot be established beyond doubt in every case today for which research the human remains were used in the past. At the time around 1900, however, they were often used for investigations which we now not only regard as scientifically obsolete but also as ideologically driven and morally reprehensible. Germans today deeply regret this dark chapter in our scientific history. We are profoundly shocked at how colonial thinking at that time turned into open and malevolent racism and excessive nationalism.

Examining this period and its long-term consequences is of great importance, not only in Namibia but also in Germany, especially for young people. They are not to blame for what happened in the past, but they are asking more and more legitimate questions. It is of paramount importance that we reflect on our history. For it does not bode well for the future if we ignore the past. This process of repatriating historical human remains thus offers both Namibians and Germans an opportunity.

We, the generation of today, do not want to be hostages of history. However, we must ensure that past injustices are never forgotten. I hope that we will find the strength to continue to reach out to each other.

Thank you very much.