

Government Press Conference of 10 July 2015 in the very wording

Topics: (...) Imperial Germany's Colonial war in Namibia (...)

QUESTION: I don't know who wishes to answer this one, Mr Seibert or Mr Schäfer? At present, there are new initiatives and new pressure on the German government to define the massacres of the Herero and Nama as genocide. What are the chances that the Federal Government will change its position?

DR. SCHÄFER: I thank you for the question. We, i.e. also the Foreign Minister, who currently is in Vienna where he is attending the Iran negotiations, followed the debate of the past days very attentively.

Ms Müller, that gives me the opportunity to give my opinion - in two three sentences - about the Federal Government's position on this question:

Firstly, the basis for all actions and for our political motivation is the guiding principle that the Federal Government - against the background of the brutal colonial war of Imperial Germany in South West Africa acknowledges Germany's special historical responsibility towards Namibia and its citizens and especially towards the Herero, Nama, San and Damara. This necessitates all further actions, also today's political actions of the Federal Government and the Foreign Minister.

Right at the beginning of his second term of office as Foreign Minister, Mr Steinmeier included the topic of dealing with the German colonial history in Deutsch-Südwestafrika and shaping a joint future with Namibia on his agenda. Already more than one year ago, he welcomed his Namibian colleague here in Berlin, had a long discussion with her and both specifically agreed to start a political dialogue process, which was instantly implemented. Both Ministers intend to contribute to overcoming the effects of colonialism in Namibia felt until today. The objective of this German-Namibian dialogue is to find a dignified manner to commemorate and remember the atrocities of before. I specifically repeat: to jointly find / look for a new way, and, on the basis of a joint understanding about the past, lead the bilateral relations between Germany and Namibia into the future.

I once again repeat: It is a matter of jointly shaping the future without hiding the past. However, this is not to say that a historical and political definition of the events about more than 110 years ago are not of great importance and may not serve as a basis for our future-oriented dialogue. The search for a joint evaluation of the terrible events of the past are a self-understood, important aspect of our current negotiations between the Foreign Office, the German Foreign Minister, and our counterparts in the Namibian government.

These talks do not take place in a vacuum. They take place cognizant of, and, on the basis of the current political and historical consideration of the terrible occurrences of before. Ms Heidmarie Wieczorek-Zeul, the former Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development, during her visit to Windhoek in 2004, already said on behalf of the Federal Government:

“We Germans accept our historical-political and moral-ethical responsibility and the guilt incurred by Germans at that time. The atrocities committed at that time would today be termed genocide.”

This quote continues, but I shall stop here. Since that time, it constitutes the political guideline of the former Federal Government, and the guideline of the current Foreign Minister. Of course, this is also valid in the current negotiations with our partners of the Namibian Government. Amongst others, after the conclusion of these negotiations, we intend to publish a joint declaration, which will naturally include this part of the past and the language for such a joint assessment of the past.

On behalf of Mr Steinmeier, I wish to add this is also his political guideline - also in times when he was not the Foreign Minister. May be some of you are aware of the motion of the former opposition of SPD and Greens of 20 March (2012) in the German Bundestag. It dealt with exactly this question, and the former chief of the parliamentary caucus, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, was one of the co-initiators and co-signers. The motion was rejected with the majority of the German Bundestag. However, for Mr Steinmeier it is still the guiding principle *via-à-vis* his Namibia policy.

May be you allow me another two sentences referring to the state of negotiations: Georg Schmidt, the Africa-director in the Foreign Office, travelled to Windhoek already three times for direct negotiations and consultations with regard to the implementation of the agreement of a joint dialogue process. Also, during this week contact was made between the capital cities Berlin and Windhoek. The negotiations are very constructive and have progressed well; yet, they have not been concluded.

Last sentence: We hope that these talks - the talks between the Federal Government and the Government of Namibia - will continue in a fruitful political environment and a climate of mutual trust.

I emphasise this specifically, because dealing with this traumatic aspect of one's own national history is all but easy in Namibia. There are many, mutually conflicting interests, which the new government under a new President, Mr Geingob, have to review and harmonize.

ADDITIONAL QUESTION: Now, that was a terribly long response. Nevertheless, I shall inquire. So far, I had the impression that Ms Wieczorek-Zeul's 2004 statement had been something like - and I shall say that in inverted commas - “lapse” or *faut-pas*. Please, correct me if necessary, but ever since, I have not heard the Federal Government making use of the term ‘genocide’. I ask once again: Is Mr Steinmeier clear on that it was genocide then?

Mr Seibert, you as the spokesperson for the other part of the Federal Government so to speak, (Mr Seibert is Chancellor Merkel's spokesperson) let me ask you: What is the official line of the Federal Government? Was it genocide then? I ask this because it was mentioned that Mr Steinmeier demanded this during his time in the opposition, but had no majority.

Another question: Will (the German Government) officially apologize - that is what is demanded?

DR. SCHÄFER: What I could probably do to answer your question, and what I have already mentioned albeit a little generically, is to quote the decisive passage of the motion of SPD and Green caucus of 20 March 2012. I believe that it will be clear then.

QUESTION: Right now, I am not so much interested in that. I am interested in today's position.

DR. SCHÄFER: But I told you just now that this is the Foreign Minister's position of today, and he has co-signed this motion.

QUESTION: Okay, off you go!

DR. SCHÄFER: May I?

ADDITIONAL QUESTION: Please go ahead!

DR. SCHÄFER: That is very kind of you.

“The German Bundestag recognizes the heavy burden of guilt incurred by the German colonial troops against the Herero, Nama, Damara and San. The German Bundestag emphasises, as proven by historians for many years, that the war of extermination in Namibia from 1904-1908 was a war crime and genocide. In that context, the German Bundestag emphasises the continued German responsibility for Namibia's future.”

STATE SECRETARY SEIBERT: I do not have anything to add to that.

ADDITIONAL QUESTION: Does that mean that this is the official guideline of the Federal Government?

DR. SCHÄFER: That means - it is what I have tried to make clear to you in my probably lengthy deliberations – it means this is the position of the Federal Government. The Federal Government entered into negotiations with the Namibian Government about one year ago with the objective of finding common ground about what happened and to find a common language and then, sometime when finalized, to publish it, and on that basis to develop a number of projects in response to, and, confront the effects of, the deeds perpetrated in the German name between 1904 and 1908, which are felt still today. That is the objective.

I said, we have not reached this point yet. The negotiations are very constructive and are going well. However, as yet we have not reached the point where I could give you a concrete date, for instance, when the Federal Government and the Government of Namibia would make such a declaration public.

QUESTION: Dr. Schäfer, I have not fully understood it. The position, the opinion of the Federal Government is: Yes, it was genocide.

DR. SCHÄFER: But I have read it out to you just now; indeed.

ADDITIONAL QUESTION: The Federal Government says: That was genocide. - That would indeed be an announcement to make.

DR. SCHÄFER: Then announce it.

QUESTION: Are there any plans for an apology?

DR. SCHÄFER: I believe this question has been asked before. It is absolutely correct that I have not responded to it. That was my mistake.

I kindly ask for your patience, which has to be shown until the negotiations of the Federal Government, represented by the Foreign Office, and the Government of Namibia, have been concluded. I tried to explain, in the final analysis it is about shaping Namibia's future. Yet, doing that reasonably it needs us to jointly deal with the past.

We are in the process of these negotiations. In my response to the questions of Ms Müller and Mr Jung, I explained the Federal Government's attitude, interpretation, and assessment of the historical events of 1904 to 1908, which guides the government in the negotiations. Yet, they have not been concluded, but are ongoing. At present, I am truly not in the position to anticipate what will come out of it on the side of Germany and Namibia.