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The way forward

100 years after the end of German colonialism in Namibia, the two countries are edging closer to reconciliation

Read this interview in German.

From 1904 to 1908, German troops in the short-lived colony German South West Africa, today's Namibia, carried out what is now considered the first genocide of the 20th century. In 2004, 100 years after it occured, Germany finally acknowledged the perpetration of these atrocities against the local OvaHerero and Nama communities. Since then, a reconciliation process between Namibia and Germany has been ongoing. Recently, Germany handed back the human remains of some of the genocide's victims which had been sent to Germany for experimentation.

Joanna Itzek spoke to Former Namibian Ambassador to Germany, Peter H. Katjavivi, who was instrumental in initiating the repatriation, about the current state of the German-Namibian reconciliation process.

You have been part of the reconciliation process between Namibia and Germany for quite some time. Where do we stand compared to 2008 when you represented Namibia as its Ambassador to Germany?

> We have come a long way since the time when I served as an Ambassador in Berlin. 10 years ago, the German authorities were totally indifferent vis-à-vis the call by Namibia for them to acknowledge atrocities committed between 1904 and 1908. Germany at that time lived in a state of denial. What is important now is that there has been a shift both at the Government and Parliament level, to acknowledge the events as a genocide. Of course, since 2015, our two Governments are now engaged in a serious discussion to find an amicable solution. Nothing has a perfect beginning; time is required for anything to be perfect, as Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere, the former President of Tanzania says.

What do you think about the notion 'reconciliation process'? Can such a process ever be concluded?

The two Governments are engaged in finding an amicable solution that will satisfy all stakeholders. This process must be led by Governments of both countries but of course this would also include stakeholders like the affected communities whose views are being incorporated in the process.

It goes without doubt that, a successful outcome of the reconciliation on the issue of the 1904-8 genocide, will go a long way towards strengthening reconciliation between communities inside Namibia, particularly between German-speaking Namibians and the rest of their compatriots.

It is on record that Chancellor Konrad Adenauer took a bold stand in 1951 to reconcile Germans and the Jewish people on the matter of the Holocaust, and this paved way for the reconciliation between Germany and Israel. Likewise, Chancellor Willy Brandt showed similar courage when he knelt at the Memorial of the Warsaw Uprising. These bold steps have been instrumental in creating harmony between Germany and its former adversaries. I hope the leadership of Germany today will borrow a leaf from what their forefathers did. As the expression goes, the further behind you look, the more forward you are likely to see!

Representatives of the OvaHerero and Nama communities criticise the official government talks and point out that their interests are not represented around the negotiating table. You are a member of the OvaHerero community yourself. What is your take on this?

I am aware that there has been a great sense of skepticism on the part of certain sections of the OvaHerero and Nama communities with regard to the current negotiations. There is an assumption that they are left out. There is also the notion that we were the immediate victims of the 1904-08 genocide. The extermination order specifically targeted the OvaHerero and Nama. But it is important to point out that H.E. Dr. Hage Geingob, the President of the Republic of Namibia, is on record for emphasising the need for inclusiveness of the negotiations.

What does this mean concretely?

During the recent return of human remains to Namibia, traditional leaders from the OvaHerero and Nama communities came with the government delegation to Berlin to receive the skulls, and were part of the ceremonies both in Berlin and Windhoek. This was an important step forward in inclusiveness.

It is our aim to ensure that the door to the negotiation process is open for all those who were affected by the events of 1904-08. A successful

outcome to the negotiations between our two governments is vital to our own reconciliation, peace and co-existence in Namibia. Therefore, any right-thinking Namibian should see the need to ensure that all affected communities join hands in this matter.

Do you think the negotiations are sufficiently transparent?

Negotiations are governed by a certain ethos and procedures, especially for sensitive subjects like this one. You don't negotiate through the media. These negotiations involve politics, diplomacy and issues that arouse strong emotions. Therefore, they have to be managed with tact and expertise, in a manner that inspires confidence in both governments and among the citizens in both countries, as well as the international community of spectators.

Former Chancellor Willy Brandt once said that foreign relations are too important to leave them to governments alone. Do you see room for a 'people-to-people' approach in the intended reconciliation process?

On the whole, Namibia and Germany do enjoy an excellent cordial relationship. But this relationship must also be carried out at all levels of society: government to government, parliament to parliament, private sector to private sector, civil society organisations to civil society organisations as well as people to people in both our countries.

Equally, I want to emphasise the historical ties that exist between our religious institutions. The churches in Berlin and Windhoek played an important role in the recent handover of human remains, and they should continue to play a role in this area of reconciliation. As the Parliament of the Republic of Namibia, we have a vested interest in the successful implementation of the motion from our Parliament that kick-started this entire process of negotiations. Both our parliaments have been engaged with this process, and we should continue to do so. This will add value to the government-to-government negotiations.



Peter H. Katjavivi

Windhoek

Professor Peter H. Katjavivi is Speaker of the Namibian National Assembly. He was Namibian ambassador to the European Union and ambassador to Berlin. In 2016, he was elected Chancellor of the Namibian University for Science and Technology.