Netherlands apologizes for Dutch government's role in slavery

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Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte gives a speech at the National Archives in The Hague [Robin van Lonkhuijsen/EPA]

Amsterdam, December 19 (RHC)-- Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte has formally apologized on behalf of the Netherlands for its historical role in slavery, and for consequences that he acknowledged continue into the present day. "Today I apologize," Rutte said on Monday, speaking at a nationally televised speech at the Dutch National Archives.

The prime minister went on to say: "For centuries, the Dutch state and its representatives have enabled and stimulated slavery and have profited from it. "It is true that nobody alive today bears any personal guilt for slavery … [however] the Dutch state bears responsibility for the immense suffering that has been done to those that were enslaved and their descendants."

The apology comes amid a wider reconsideration of the country's colonial past, including efforts to return looted art, and its current struggles with racism. The prospect of an apology on a December afternoon in The Hague had been met with resistance from groups who say it should come from King Willem-Alexander in the former colony of Suriname, on July 1, 2023 -- the 160th anniversary of Dutch abolition.

"It takes two to tango – apologies have to be received," said Roy Kaikusi Groenberg of the Honor and Recovery Foundation, a Dutch Afro-Surinamese organization. He said it felt wrong that activists who are descendants of slaves have struggled for years to change the national discussion but had not been sufficiently consulted. "The way the government is handling this, it's coming across as a neocolonial belch," he said.

Rutte acknowledged a clumsy handling of the run-up to the announcement and said the Dutch government is sending representatives to Suriname, as well as to Caribbean islands that remain a part of the kingdom of the Netherlands with varying degrees of autonomy: Curacao, Sint Maarten, Aruba, Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius.

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