

Germany recognizes colonial-era massacres in Namibia as genocide

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Germany will also ask forgiveness from Namibia for the 'immense suffering' caused during the massacres in 1904-1908.

Berlin, May 28 (RHC)-- Germany has recognized for the first time that it committed genocide in Namibia during its colonial rule more than a century ago and promised financial support worth more than one billion euros (\$1.2 billion) to fund infrastructure projects in the African nation.

German settlers killed thousands of Herero and Nama people between 1904 and 1908, after the tribes rebelled against Berlin's rule in the colony, then called German South West Africa. Survivors were driven into the desert, where many ended up in concentration camps to be used as slave labour and many died from cold, malnutrition and exhaustion.

"We will now officially refer to these events as what they are from today's perspective: genocide," German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said in a statement on Friday. "In light of the historical and moral responsibility of Germany, we will ask forgiveness from Namibia and the victims' descendants for the atrocities committed," he said.

The news was welcomed by Namibia: "The acceptance on the part of Germany that a genocide was committed is the first step in the right direction," the country's President Hage Geingob's spokesman Alfredo Hengari told AFP news agency.

As a gesture "to recognize the immense suffering inflicted on victims", Germany will also support the "reconstruction and the development" of Namibia via a financial programme of 1.1 billion euros (\$1.34 billion), Maas said. The sum will be paid over 30 years, according to sources close to the negotiations and must primarily benefit the descendants of the Herero and Nama.

Maas also said the agreed payment, which came after more than five years of negotiations, does not open the way to any "legal request for compensation."

In 1904, tensions boiled over when the Herero – deprived of their livestock and land – rose up, followed shortly after by the Nama. German General Lothar von Trotha, sent to put down the rebellion, ordered the peoples' extermination. At least 60,000 Hereros and about 10,000 Namas were killed between 1904 and 1908.

Colonial soldiers carried out mass executions; exiled men, women, and children to the desert where thousands died of thirst; and established infamous concentration camps, such as the one on Shark Island. The atrocities have poisoned relations between Berlin and Windhoek for years.

The German government has previously acknowledged "moral responsibility" for the killings but Berlin has avoided an official apology to ward off compensation claims. In 2015, it began formal negotiations with Namibia over the issue and in 2018 it returned skulls and other remains of massacred tribespeople that were used in the colonial-era experiments to assert claims of European racial superiority.

On Thursday, Namibian presidential spokesman Alfredo Hengari told the Reuters news agency that a joint declaration outlining the agreement was made by special envoys of both countries on May 15, at the end of the ninth round of negotiations over the issue.

Hengari also said an official apology from Germany was expected, adding that "implementation modalities can only commence after the president has spoken to affected communities."

Herero Paramount Chief Vekuii Rukoro told Reuters the reported settlement was a "sellout." The chief, who unsuccessfully sued Germany for compensation in the United States, said the agreement was not enough for the two communities, which had suffered "irreversible harm" at the hands of German colonial forces.

"We have a problem with that kind of an agreement, which we feel constitutes a complete sellout on the part of the Namibian government," Rukoro said.

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