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Herero and Nama petition Govt for return of ancestral skulls

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TRADITIONAL chiefs of the Nama and Herero communities jointly signed a petition yesterday to be presented to the Namibian and German governments to demand the return of about 50 skulls of their ancestors from Germany, where they have been kept in museums for 100 years.

They want the skulls returned to Namibia by May next year.

“Both our delegations of chiefs have met Wednesday night with Youth, Culture and Sport Minister Willem Konjore to discuss the matter since the re-discovery of the skulls was made public in Germany in July last year,” said Ida Hoffmann, a Member of Parliament and one of the campaigners to have the skulls returned.

The petition was handed over to Minister Konjore yesterday afternoon and the intention was to deliver it to the German embassy in Windhoek as well, but the group did not get an appointment so quickly.

“The Embassy told us to phone again Friday (today),” said Esther Muinjangu, Chairperson of Ovaherero Genocide Committee.

The signing of the petition yesterday was witnessed by a large group of Nama and Herero chiefs. According to Muinjangu, skulls should be returned at the latest on May 28 next year. This is the date when the German colonial government in Namibia declared the war to be over in 1908.

After the uprising against German colonial rule, German scientists demanded the skulls of dead prisoners to be sent to Berlin for “scientific research”.

“We need the skulls of our ancestors to return, also possibly the skull of my grandfather, Chief Cornelius Fredericks, among them, so the families can pay respect to them and get a chance to mourn,” said Chief Fredericks.

Ida Hoffmann said the two groups want to send a delegation to Germany before the skulls return in order to perform some traditional rituals on them.

Chief Riruako said the skulls should not be buried at Heroes’ Acre. “Some people seem to propose this, but we want them displayed in a genocide museum in front of the Alte Feste here in Windhoek,” he said.

Government is currently building an ‘Independence Museum’ at that spot to commemorate the liberation struggle.

“We cannot separate history and the different phases of resistance to colonial rule. We have to combine them in such a museum,” Riruako said. The area where the new museum is being built by North Korean builders is the very soil where hundreds of Herero and Nama prisoners had to live in flimsy huts from 1904 to 1908.

Ghanaian scholar Dr Kwame Opoku recently wrote an online feature article about artefacts not being returned by European museums to countries of origin.

He wrote that over six thousand skulls as well as dried skin, hair, plaster casts of faces, heads, hands, and feet are in Berlin museums.

According to Opoku, the Ethnology Museum has priority in all ethnographical materials that came from former German colonies.

A law passed in 1888 by the German parliament required that all ethnographic materials collected in the German colonies by government officials or expeditions supported by government funds be sent first to the Ethnology Museum.