

The Namibian

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Katjavivi demands Herero skulls from Germany

By: BRIGITTE WEIDLICH

NAMIBIA'S former Ambassador to Germany, Professor Peter Katjavivi, has demanded that German universities return dozens of human skulls, remains of the colonial-era Herero massacre, that are held in their archives.

Germany's public television broadcaster ARD reported on Monday night that the skulls of Herero and Nama prisoners of the 1904-1908 uprisings against Imperial German rule were sent to Germany for "scientific research" by Dr Eugen Fischer with the aim at that time of proving the racial superiority of whites over blacks.

The television programme showed some of the 47 skulls still stored at the Medical History Museum at the Charité hospital in Berlin and at least a dozen more at Freiburg University.

University archivists did not deny the finds when asked by ARD.

"It is a cultural collection," Freiburg University archive director Dieter Speck said.

"According to an existing Unesco (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) Convention, these things must be repatriated to their country of origin," Katjavivi told ARD on Monday.

"We have institutions in Namibia that would be prepared to undertake that important assignment."

Katjavivi said the remains were deeply important to Namibians.

"It is a question of regaining our dignity, it is a question of regaining our history.

And it is a question of finally bringing those skulls to have a proper burial," he added.

"We are not emotional.

We are just saying the facts are there.

What is now a challenge to Germany and Namibia is to approach those issues as calmly as possible to assure we do the right thing at the right time."

ARD reporter Markus Frenzel said there may be more Herero remains lurking in German archives.

"It is believed that a total of at least 300 Herero (and Nama) skulls were taken to Germany in the early 20th century," Frenzel told Agence France Presse news agency on Tuesday.

In a telephonic interview with The Namibian yesterday, Frenzel said he would like to follow up on more details regarding this matter in Namibia.

He was surprised to hear from The Namibian that one of the skulls was probably that of Nama Chief Cornelius Frederick, who died as prisoner on Shark Island.

"If this can be confirmed and proven, the matter becomes even more important," Frenzel told The Namibian.

On Monday night's TV programme, Katjavivi said he looked forward to resolving the issue amicably.

"I hope the institutions will cooperate with us.

We want to handle these things as friends.

I am sure Germany would do the same if they had some of their things taken during a particular period," he said.

A spokeswoman for Germany's foreign ministry in Berlin on Tuesday declined to comment on the matter, telling AFP that "for the moment, there we have not received an official request from the Namibian authorities".

The Herero people began an uprising against the German colonial rulers in January 1904 with warriors - incensed by German settlers stealing their land, cattle and women - massacring about 200 German civilians over several days.

The German colonial rulers responded ruthlessly, defeating the Herero in a decisive battle at the Waterberg later that year.

It was followed by the notorious "extermination order" of General Lothar von Trotha, who was under the direct command of Kaiser Wilhelm II in Berlin.

Additional reporting by Nampa-AFP

The television programme showed some of the 47 skulls still stored at the Medical History Museum at the Charité hospital in Berlin and at least a dozen more at Freiburg University. University archivists did not deny the finds when asked by ARD. "It is a cultural collection," Freiburg University archive director Dieter Speck said. "According to an existing Unesco (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) Convention,

these things must be repatriated to their country of origin," Katjavivi told ARD on Monday. "We have institutions in Namibia that would be prepared to undertake that important assignment." Katjavivi said the remains were deeply important to Namibians. "It is a question of regaining our dignity, it is a question of regaining our history. And it is a question of finally bringing those skulls to have a proper burial," he added. "We are not emotional. We are just saying the facts are there. What is now a challenge to Germany and Namibia is to approach those issues as calmly as possible to assure we do the right thing at the right time." ARD reporter Markus Frenzel said there may be more Herero remains lurking in German archives. "It is believed that a total of at least 300 Herero (and Nama) skulls were taken to Germany in the early 20th century," Frenzel told Agence France Presse news agency on Tuesday. In a telephonic interview with The Namibian yesterday, Frenzel said he would like to follow up on more details regarding this matter in Namibia. He was surprised to hear from The Namibian that one of the skulls was probably that of Nama Chief Cornelius Frederick, who died as prisoner on Shark Island. "If this can be confirmed and proven, the matter becomes even more important," Frenzel told The Namibian. On Monday night's TV programme, Katjavivi said he looked forward to resolving the issue amicably. "I hope the institutions will cooperate with us. We want to handle these things as friends. I am sure Germany would do the same if they had some of their things taken during a particular period," he said. A spokeswoman for Germany's foreign ministry in Berlin on Tuesday declined to comment on the matter, telling AFP that "for the moment, there we have not received an official request from the Namibian authorities". The Herero people began an uprising against the German colonial rulers in January 1904 with warriors - incensed by German settlers stealing their land, cattle and women - massacring about 200 German civilians over several days. The German colonial rulers responded ruthlessly, defeating the Herero in a decisive battle at the Waterberg later that year. It was followed by the notorious "extermination order" of General Lothar von Trotha, who was under the direct command of Kaiser Wilhelm II in Berlin. Additional reporting by Nampa-AFP

