We Didn’t Know Whereabouts or Number of Skulls

By Kuvee Kangueehi

WINDHOEK - Former Namibian ambassador to Berlin and current Director of the National Planning Commission, Dr Peter Katjavivi, says Namibian authorities did not know the locations and the number of skulls belonging to Namibians in German institutions and thus could not make an official request to the German government.

Katjavivi was responding to comment attributed to a German foreign affairs spokesperson, who was quoted as saying that “for the moment there has been no official request that has been received from the Namibian authorities” to repatriate the skulls.

“How could we have made a request in a vacuum if we did not know about the whereabouts of the skulls?”

The former ambassador said as a historian, he knew through research that heads of Namibians were taken to Germany for research.

Katjavivi said the information that he received now is that there are 47 skulls that are stored at the Medical History Museum at the Charite Hospital in Berlin, and they belong to Namibians who lived in the southern part of the country and at Swakopmund.

“The skulls from the southern part of the country definitely belong to the Nama-speaking people, while the skulls from Swakopmund are from Hereros, Damara and Namas as well.”

He, however, could not confirm that one of the skulls belongs to Cornelius Pedrick, who was beheaded. He said that would be guessing, although the possibility still exists.

He noted that if the process could start, more information would be revealed and people will be able to establish exactly what these individuals were like.

The latest information regarding the skulls emerged in May this year after Katjavivi’s term in Germany as an ambassador ended and he noted that had he been aware of their existence, he would have made the request earlier.

He said now that it has been established that the skulls exist, Namibia should prepare itself for the return of the skulls and the National Heritage Council should decide where the skulls would be accommodated.

“We need to plan whether the skulls will be given a burial or be placed in a museum or archives,” he said.

“I believe that the repatriation of such items and other possible items could contribute towards the healing and reconciliation in the Namibian-German relations.”

In a brief interview with the New Era, acting German Ambassador to Namibia Us Koenig, said she informed her government about the reports and the response she received is that the German government has not received any official request yet.

Koenig said she is aware that some skulls belonging to Namibians are being stored in laboratories and museums and that they were used for research purposes.

She could not elaborate on the nature of research but noted it was research to prove some racial theories which were being debated at that time.

“I am not familiar with the finding of the research because it took place at least 100 years ago but there are papers available.”

The Herero people began an uprising against German colonial rulers January 1904 with war incensed by German rulers stealing their land, men and women massacre about 200 German civilians over several days.

The German colonial rulers responded ruthlessly, defeating the Herero at a decisive battle north of Windhoek later year.

It was followed by notorious “extermination order” of General Lo von Trotha, who was under the direct command of Kaiser Wilhelm I from Berlin.

The figures for the Herero population all the time range from 50 to 80,000.