THE NAMIBIAN

Time to Call Things as They Are

• ULRICH ROOS and TIMO SEIDL

ONLY a few weeks ago, some of the most important German political authorities, including the federal president and the Bundestag, finally brought themselves to recognise the Ottoman empire’s atrocities against the Armenian minority during World War I as genocide. This was an obvious and long overdue step – but nonetheless a welcome one.

If we allow ourselves to be optimistic for a moment, we might expect it to have an impact on the German government’s stance on another genocide which Germany still refuses to acknowledge: the genocide against the Herero and Nama in Namibia committed by German colonial troops at the dawn of the 20th century.

But if we force ourselves to keep the political realities in perspective, we have to note that nothing like this has happened yet, nor is it likely to happen in the near future (although we would be glad to be proven wrong).

Those who are privy to Germany’s persistent reluctance to come to terms with and find an appropriate terminology for its colonial past must have been deeply disconcerted by the blatant yet unspoken hypocrisy that surrounded the recognition of the Armenian genocide.

Do not get us wrong here: We are not criticising the decision to recognise the Armenian genocide for what it was. We are just calling attention to the fact that most of the arguments in favour of this recognition are equally applicable to the Namibian case.

So let us see what we have heard over the past 25 years about the Herero and Nama genocide and contrast this with some more recent statements about the Armenian genocide.

The difference is striking and raises some troubling questions.

Germany’s official position since Namibia’s independence has been one of strict terminological reluctance alongside limited responsiveness to the wishes of the Namibian government. The main goal was and still is to avoid the term genocide at any cost, since it may lead to reparations, not only from Germany itself but also from German companies and other former colonial powers.

Unlike the victims and their descendants, they can count on Germany’s unrestricted solidarity, or so it seems.

Admittedly, Germany is willing to pay higher-than-average development aid. But this is because it keeps the Namibian government from effectively adopting the victim groups’ reparations claims (or seriously tackling the genocide in any of the land they were expelled from).

For obvious reasons, the Namibian government will wisely abstain from doing any of this, so it can bluntly continue allocating German development money to its (mostly Awambo) supporters.

Of course, the special initiative, instigated by the former German minister of development Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul and aimed at specifically promoting those areas of Herero and Nama people as an act of genocide.

Germany should, therefore, not only continue but significantly expand this programme, not least to enable the expropriated groups to benefit from their feet and eventually on the land they were expelled from. Moreover, and equally importantly, Germany should finally acknowledge the massacres perpetrated by its troops against the Herero and Nama people as an act of genocide.

Wieczorek-Zeul herself took an inestimable step when she risked her job to explicitly group the Herero and Nama genocide in the same context as the centennial of the capitulation of the Ottoman empire in 1918.

But as long as her speech stands on its own, its political and moral values remain limited. As long as the German government refuses to acknowledge Germany’s genocide against the Herero and Nama people, it cannot be said that Germany’s stance on the Armenian genocide is sincere.

The same is true for yet another representative of the governing conservative party, Aleksandr Vucic, who seems to have changed his mind.

Back in 1995, Vucic was a radical nationalist who declared in the Serbian National Assembly, only a few days after the Srebrenica massacre, that “If you kill one Serb, we will kill 100 Muslims”. By 2010, however, he was saying that a “horrible crime was committed in Srebrenica”.

Vucic even travelled to Srebrenica on Saturday to take part in the commemoration of the events of 20 years ago, a brave gesture for a Serbian prime minister who must contend with an electorate most of whom do not want to admit that Serbs did anything especially wrong. But he still doesn’t dare use the word “genocide”. The voters would never forgive him.

Most Serbs would acknowledge that their side did some bad things during the Balkan wars of the 90s, but they would add that every side did. They will not accept the use of the word “genocide” – whereas that is the one word Bosnian Muslims have to hear before the Serbs and their neighbours will never be reconciled until the Serbs say the word “genocide”.

“On 11 July, while the eyes of the whole world are on the killing fields near Srebrenica”, he said, “we want to send a different picture from Belgrade.”

“This will not be a story about the current regime, which has failed to define itself in relation to the crime that happened 20 years ago,” he continued, “or about a place where you can still buy souvenirs with images of Karadzic and Mladic. It will be a story about... a better Serbia.” But a better Serbia has not actually arrived yet.

Word matters. Serbia’s prime minister Aleksandar Vucic, who seems to have changed his mind about Srebrenica since his early days in Serbian politics, still cannot bring himself to use the word “genocide” when he talks about it.

The Hardest Word to Say

• GWYNNE DYER

IT is hard to say sorry, but it is even harder to say you are sorry for a genocide. The war crimes of the Bosnian Serbs under former President Karadzic and former general Ratko Mladic, are awaited verdicts in trials for directing the genocide.

You would think that even the Serbs cannot deny that it was a genocide, but you would be wrong.

There are certainly some Serbs, like journalist Dusan Mihajlovic, who are grasping the nature and scale of their crime. But as long as the Serbs and their neighbours will never be reconciled until the Serbs say the word “genocide” – whereas that is the one word Bosnian Muslims have to hear before the Serbs and their neighbours will never be reconciled until the Serbs say the word “genocide”.

The centennial of the capitulation of the Ottoman empire in 1918 was not a missed chance for a significant revision of Germany’s stance on the tragic past for the sake of a brighter future.

• ULRICH ROOS and Timo Seidl are German political scientists researching German-Namibian relations.

The Hardest Word to Say

• GWYNNE DYER

IT is hard to say sorry, but it is even harder to say you are sorry for a genocide. The war crimes of the Bosnian Serbs under former President Karadzic and former general Ratko Mladic, are awaited verdicts in trials for directing the genocide.

You would think that even the Serbs cannot deny that it was a genocide, but you would be wrong.

There are certainly some Serbs, like journalist Dusan Mihajlovic, who are grasping the nature and scale of their crime. But as long as the Serbs and their neighbours will never be reconciled until the Serbs say the word “genocide” – whereas that is the one word Bosnian Muslims have to hear before the Serbs and their neighbours will never be reconciled until the Serbs say the word “genocide”.

The centennial of the capitulation of the Ottoman empire in 1918 was not a missed chance for a significant revision of Germany’s stance on the tragic past for the sake of a brighter future.