

TRUTH, RECONCILIATION, & HEALING
Toward a Unified Future
Thursday, July 18, 2019

Statement Tracy Bibo – Tansia (long version)

Introduction

First of all, I would like to thank the Helsinki Commission for inviting me to speak at this very important briefing.

Today I am speaking as a master in international politics, former political adviser, former elected official, political activist and child of Congolese migrants. My academic background, my work experience and my migration background form the basis of my work and the statement that I will make today.

In my statement I will talk about the Belgian colonial past, how it is dealt with in Belgium and what steps have already been taken in order to address historic wrongs, heal wounds, bridge divisions, and build a shared future.

First of all, I would like to point out that the Belgian political system is a complex system with several regions (Flemish, Wallonia and Brussels region), three different parliaments, and three different governments. The history of colonization and the relationship between the different regions and the former colonies is very different. This also determines the tone with which politics deals with the colonial past.

When we talk about colonization

When we talk about the colonization of Belgium in Africa, we mainly talk about the Democratic Republic of Congo. From 1885 to 1907 Congo was the private property of the Belgian King Leopold II and from 1907 to 1960, a Belgian colony. But let us not forget that between 1922 and 1962, Rwanda and Burundi were areas of Belgium's mandate¹.

The Belgian colonization in Congo was a system based on the superiority of the white race to the black one. A handful of Belgians had control over an area 70 times larger than Belgium. The system was also based on racial segregation mainly in cities where the black Congolese population did not have access to the same areas as the white population. Violence was a daily occurrence for the Congolese. During the period of Leopold II, people's hands were cut off in some places when they did not reach their rubber quota, villages with rebellious Congolese were burned down, women were raped, and the strong men were captured. During the Belgian colonization, disobedient Congolese or insurgents were abused (whipping) and in some cases thrown into prison.

¹ Historians believe that the Belgian colonial system and the strict separation between hutus and tutsis they facilitated was one of the causes of the Rwandese genocide in 1994. Therefore, the Belgian government should apologize for that.

The main players in the colonization story were the:

- Catholic Church: whose goal was to "win souls" and save the Congolese from their pagan religions.
- big banks/wealthy (mostly Wallonian) families and entrepreneurs: that made a profit from the raw materials/natural resources that were extracted from Congo.
- Belgian Royal family: that made their fortune with Congolese money and the inheritance of the Belgian King Leopold II

These actors are the ones who maintained the colonial system for many years and benefited most from it.

General omission

75 years of brutal repression has left enormous scars on the Congolese population. The fear of repression has caused many Congolese people in Congo and from the diaspora to remain silent for a long time about the impact of colonization on their lives and the lives of their ancestors.

Belgium, too, has for a long time remained silent about the atrocities that were committed in Congo. Not only out of shame, but also because for a long time people believed that the colonization was a civilization mission. It is not for nothing that many history books in Belgium do not mention colonization or, when they do, focus on the achievements of the Belgians (roads, health care and education). This general omission in Belgian society made people for a long time believe that colonization was not that bad after all.

The past years there has been a change in the way we look at colonization in Belgium. There are several reasons for this:

- Generational differences: The first generation of Congolese in Belgium did not really feel Belgian and did not really care about the past (with a few exceptions). The 2nd generation, like myself, has become aware of the fact that in education the shared history that Congo has with Belgium has been taught in a limited way. This generation has started to question the role of Belgium in Congolese colonization. Not only do we question the role of Belgium in colonialism but we also ask for recognition and reparation for our Congolese ancestors.
- Systematic racism on black people in Belgium: The systematic racism that black people experience in Belgium has its roots in colonization and this has been proven by a number of studies. The best known study is that of the King Baudouin Foundation², which proved, among other things, that structural racism in the labour market has to do with the stereotypes created about black people during colonization. These stereotypes live on in people's minds, either consciously or unconsciously. The recent UN report³ (on the human rights of people of African descent in Belgium) confirms a number of issues that were addressed in that study.
- A number of books and documentaries that have been made in recent years. Examples: the book by David van Reybrouck "Congo : the epic history" (2010) and the documentary children of the colony in the Flemish media (2018).⁴

² <https://www.kbs-frb.be/en/Newsroom/Press-releases/2017/20171122AJ>

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24155&LangID=E>

⁴ <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/en/2018/12/11/british-paper-reports-on-vrts-congo-documentary-series/>

- The question of the *metis children* (mixed raced children): A change in the adoption laws revealed that different metis children born during the colonization to a white father and black mother were kidnapped, sent to boarding schools in Rwanda and/or Congo and after the independence of Congo were sent to Belgium to be adopted by new families where they lost their identity. These issues led to the first resolution and apologies to this group by the Belgian prime minister in 2019.

Reparations

When you break something that doesn't belong to you, you need to repair it or pay it back. It is no secret that colonization has broken the DNA of Congolese culture and has put a hold on the development of the population in Congo itself. Some people are scared only by hearing the word reparation but if we want to heal wounds, build bridges and build a shared future repairing what was broken in the past is indispensable.

Some steps have been made to address the historical wrongs of the Belgian colonization in Congo:

- Education: The first step to address a historical wrong is acknowledging and teaching it. On the Flemish side the Minister of Education stressed the importance of changing the narratives when teachers talk about colonization and include the suffering of the Congolese people. Only focusing on the accomplishments of the Belgians in Congo is no longer acceptable in 2019. She introduced some new directives for the schools in Flanders. There are, however, a number of limitations to directives. The different school networks are free to design these lessons about colonization. The teachers also have the freedom to decide how extensively they will talk about colonization. So, it is also encouraged to talk about diversity and how to deal with it in the teachers training. It is a small but important step in the recognition of the suffering of the Congolese and the impact of Colonization on the current Congolese diaspora.
- Politics: As a political adviser, I worked on the resolution of the metis children. In that resolution the government urged reparations for the metis children. The resolution led to apologies from the prime minister and concrete actions (opening the archives, helping the metis find their families and give them financial help to go back to the former colonies to find their families). The work of the Belgian government has been on hold since the last elections. We will need to wait for the next government to see how the policy for metis families will be implemented.
- While apologies for colonization have been given by individual politicians, an apology by the Belgian government for colonization hasn't been given yet. The mayor of Brussels f.e. apologized for colonization and also inaugurated the Lumumba Square as a symbolic gesture to the Congolese diaspora living in Belgium.
- After the various studies and the realisation that the impact on the Congolese diaspora is large (racism in Belgium today), there was a consensus among different political parties to discuss colonization in different political hearings. These hearings should take place after the inauguration of the government, which is currently in the process of being set up following our recent elections. With the exception of two parties, all parties are convinced that talks on reparations will form an important part of these hearings.
- What is also hindering this process is the fact that various parties want to avoid a constitutional crisis. In which the Flemish nationalist party uses the issue to attack the royal family in order to force a split in Belgium. That is why it has been radio silent at the

side of the royal family around the issue. The King has already recognised in the past that Congolese soldiers had fought during the World Wars and those soldiers should not be forgotten in history. But he has not yet spoken a word on colonization. Also, when we talk about reparations the fear of the financial cost that it can bring is something the people that benefited the most of colonization want to avoid at all cost.

When we talk about reparations, we also have to talk about restitution of stolen art. The director of the new Africa Museum in Tervuren already mentioned that this would be the next step. However, this also depends on the conditions of the museum in Congo and the protection of some art. The stolen art work in the Museum is controversial. The director however tries to connect old colonialists with members of the Congolese diaspora to bridge divisions and create a mutual understanding of the shared history.

Conclusion

As a Belgian of Congolese origin who has worked on colonization and reparation in recent years, I have been able to learn a lot about the issue and think about how we can deal with the colonial past and build a future with respect and recognition for the victims of the colonial system.

- Dialogue: It is important to enter into a dialogue with each other. For example, young people from the diaspora and former colonialists can enter into a dialogue with each other about the shared history. It is not our story vs their story but it's our shared history.
- Recognition: starting with recognition is important. We must acknowledge that colonization, such as slavery, were racist systems that benefited one group and marginalized others. But the most important thing is recognizing that until today it has had an impact on marginalized groups. To say that people just have to get over it is to turn a blind eye to the racism that black people are facing today. We can only find a solution to the racism that black people are experiencing today when look at the causes.
- Knowledge: knowledge about colonization (and what Congo looked like before colonisation) is limited. When people (elected officials or the public opinion) have no knowledge about colonization, it is difficult to get them interested in resolutions or legislation about it. As a parliamentary assistant and political adviser, it was my duty to explain to all the elected officials of my party about colonization and its impact on the Congolese population. Demonstrating that the colonial system is separate from individual stories of people during colonization is important, as not to demonize every colonizer. It is also important to explain how the racial injustice of today is based on the colonial system.
- Reparations: It's hard to talk about reparations. Reparation is about fighting racial inequalities created by political systems that in the past were maintained by a privileged group. Hearings to determine exactly what this recovery means are therefore necessary. In Belgium, the critics of reparations are going to say that they do not want to pay out money to a corrupt country like Congo. But recovery is also about racial inequality in Belgium. What if we finance programmes that, for example, aim to provide better health care for the black population who, according to studies, are more affected by certain diseases? What if we eliminate inequality in education by means of targeted programmes? Reparations is about more than handing out cheques to the black population. It is about eliminating inequalities. That is why it is more than necessary

- Dialogue and knowledge about colonisation. Recognition and reparations are the key elements to address historic wrongs, heal wounds, bridge divisions, and build a shared future. I believe this is the key to a future where we fight inequality by understanding and addressing the past.

Thank you
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