

Rwanda confirms Belgium willing to return archives

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Belgium is set to return to Rwanda some of its artifacts, including archives of the colonial period, the Belgian Minister of Development Cooperation, Alexander De Croo, told the media recently.

According to Amb. Robert Masozera, the Director General of National Museums of Rwanda (INMR), the Rwandan cultural heritage that Belgium is willing to return includes more than 2,000 ethnographic artifacts, more than 4,000 photographs, and a big number of films and musical recordings.

From September 17-19, this year, Masozera said he participated in a conference held under the theme, 'Sharing Past and Future : Strengthening African-European connections,' in Brussels, where he spoke about the issue of the archives.

The meeting was organised by the Royal Museum for Africa and Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations and one of the main panel discussion was dedicated to how the issue of African cultural heritage in Europe should be treated.

"During the conference, Belgium said it was in favour of the return of the Rwandan cultural heritage in general and to give Rwandan authorities

access to the archives on Rwanda," he added.

Masozera explained that the Rwandan heritage held in Belgium is diverse, ranging from artistic heritage, to archaeological materials or archives, all collected mainly during the colonial times.

"We are talking of something between 2,000 and 3,000 ethnographic artifacts and about five kilometres of archival collections, plus over 4,000 photographs and a big number of films and musical recordings," he said.

The restitution of this heritage, Masozera said, is not only legitimate but could also "contribute to the socio-economic development and to Rwanda's cultural pride and renaissance of the country."

According to media reports, a two-year project which aims to digitise all archives in possession of the Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren and royal archives, at a cost of 400,000, starts next year with a visit of Rwandan archivists who will define their priorities.

The Central African Museum, located in Tervuren, Belgium, is home to many artifacts and documents carted away by missionaries and colonial administrators from Rwanda, Burundi and present-day DR Congo.

Asked about when exactly the material will arrive in Kigali, Masozera said that it is still early to know because it will be a process.

“Forms, modalities, timeline, and so on of this return will need to be discussed and decided through appropriate channels,” he said.

The INMR could not reveal who will foot the 400,000 bill, saying it is only involved in the deal at a technical level.

However, Oleg Olivier Karambizi, the Advisor to the Minister for Sports and Culture, said : “We welcome the statement from the Belgian Minister of Cooperation. Subsequently, through diplomatic channels, bilateral discussions will be held to determine technicalities on how this commitment will be brought to fruition. Further steps will be led through the foreign affairs diplomatic channels.”

Rwanda’s envoy to Brussels, Amb. Amandin Rugira, said : “Belgium will hand over to Rwanda, and not sell.”

Belgium will assist Rwanda in digitalisation of the archives, he added.

According to Masozera, western museums are in favour of return of Rwandan cultural heritage mainly because they see that in Rwanda there is

no risk that repatriated objects would be harmed, stolen or resold to collectors.

Kigali is, among others, in the process of building a modern state-of-the-art national archives edifice.

Working with Germany

Kigali is also looking to strike a similar deal with Germany over a similar cause.

And Masozera alluded to the case of the mysterious presence of nearly 1,000 Rwandan human skulls in Germany.

“We have set up a joint technical team who are working on the provenience research of these human remains,” he said.

In October last year, Deutsche Welle (DW), Germany’s international broadcaster, reported that over 1000 skulls in the European country belong to east Africans – 986 of which are from Rwanda – and had been taken to Berlin during the colonial era for racial “scientific” research.

Forty-one are thought to be from Tanzania, four from Burundi, while 54 others are simply marked “East Africa.”