

# The power of an apology

## Apologies by countries for past mistakes can improve bilateral ties and help people reconcile with the past

Tatiana Belousova JUNE 28, 2021

In May, Germany officially apologised to Namibia for the massacre of the Herero and Nama people in 1904-1908 and called it a genocide for the first time. Around the same time, French President Emmanuel Macron said in Rwanda that he recognised his country's role in the Rwandan genocide and hoped for forgiveness.

### Positive effects

The importance of these gestures cannot be overestimated. They can generate multiple positive effects. Apart from strengthening the relations between the countries involved, apologies by leaders help people reconcile with the past and countries and communities take lessons from history and avoid similar tragedies. Most importantly, they provide some solace to the victims' descendants; they give them a sense of justice and rectitude.

There were many public debates following the apology from Germany regarding reparations. Herero activists insist that the development aid offered by the German authorities is not enough and is generic in nature. According to them, the descendants of the genocide's victims should receive a tangible compensation, primarily in the form of land property that had been taken away by the German colonisers. This is a complex issue, whereby it is difficult to find a mutually acceptable compromise. 'What is the right price to pay for genocide?' is a rhetorical question.

Unlike Germany and France, Turkey has been in constant denial of the Armenian genocide during World War I. In April 2021, the Turkish President went as far as condemning the recognition of the genocide by the newly elected American President, Joe Biden. This strained bilateral relations between Turkey and the U.S. even further. Apparently, the overarching image of Mr. Erdogan as a 'strongman' does not go well with any kind of apology on the international stage. There is enough evidence that the killing of 1.5 million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during World War I was indeed genocide. Leaders like Mr. Erdogan seem to believe that asking for forgiveness can be interpreted as a sign of weakness. In fact, it is quite the opposite.

The Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, has a propensity for apologies. According to him, "apologies for things in the past are important to make sure that we actually understand and know and share and do not repeat those mistakes". In 2016, Mr. Trudeau apologised before the descendants of passengers of the Komagata Maru ship. In 1914, the Canadian government of the day had decided to turn away the ship carrying South Asian migrants, mostly Sikhs. The ship was forced to return to India. Back home, the British suspected the passengers to be revolutionaries and an altercation began. Many passengers were shot dead.

In 2018, Mr. Trudeau apologised for his country's role in turning away a ship carrying over 900 Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution.

Such apologies require courage, good will, compassion, and humility. It is not an easy task to apologise, given that one has to do so for events that took place decades or even a century ago.

### In search of a moral compass

Arguably, a sense of humility is a rare phenomenon in contemporary geopolitics. We are witnessing a re-emergence of political leaders, from Nicaragua to Myanmar, who are ready to resort to any means in order to remain in power. In this environment, apologetic voices become even more precious as they help us reconcile with tragic events of the past and remove the stains of history. Besides, they add a moral dimension to international relations.

In this sense, to be a pillar of the multipolar world is not to be a military power, manufacturing and/or financial hub, and/or a global investor alone. Countries that strive for global leadership should be able to provide moral leadership as well.

This includes critical self-reflection, humility, compassion, and care not only towards their own people, but also towards the most vulnerable communities around the world.

*Tatiana Belousova is Assistant Professor at the Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat, Haryana*