

PRESS RELEASE

Publication of the expert report on Belgian colonial past: Signatories call for a holistic and inclusive justice process

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On the occasion of its presentation to Parliament, the signatories commend the publication of the report written by the multidisciplinary team of experts mandated by the Special Parliamentary Commission on Belgium's Colonial Past. This report is a new milestone towards a better understanding of the Belgian colonial era. It constitutes an important contribution to a peaceful debate on this issue between the different segments of contemporary Belgian society.

Claims about the historical harms of colonisation and their contemporary consequences in terms of structural racism have been present for many years in the Belgian public debate, but have gained renewed interest since the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. It was this social mobilisation, led mainly by Afro-descendant groups in Belgian society, that led to the establishment of the Special Commission in July 2020. The report of the Commission's experts must therefore be appreciated against the demands for justice regarding Belgium's colonial past.

In this respect, the report shows certain limitations that should be noted. First of all, this report was born out of a narrow process of truth establishment, mainly contained within Belgian public institutions. As mentioned several times, the Special Commission that commissioned this expert report is a political commission, controlled by the different Belgian political parties. Its work is, for the time being, not open to representatives of Belgian civil society, nor to civil societies from formerly colonised countries. Therefore, the experts' report is not the result of an inclusive and open process, in contrast to the established good practices of transitional justice in terms of truth-establishment.

Secondly, the report only partially fulfils the objectives set by the Commission itself. It essentially addresses Belgium's colonial past in the current Democratic Republic of Congo, and does not address the cases of Burundi and Rwanda. Similarly, the report is essentially focused on the actions of the Belgian state, and only slightly covers the role of non-state actors. Yet the commission is mandated to examine the role and structural impact that not only the Belgian state and the Belgian authorities, but also non-state actors such as the monarchy, the church and the private sector had on the colonial phenomenon.

The signatories hope that this report will serve as a basis for an actual Transitional Justice process, whose tools (truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-repetition) are now established to be relevant to tackle colonial liabilities and continuities. The report offers a number of avenues for reflection that the Commission should materialize into concrete plans for reforms and in an open and inclusive framework. In this regard, the Commission is particularly expected to publish a work plan for its upcoming work and to clarify its engagement strategies with all stakeholders. This report should not be a mere contribution to History, but the basis for an articulated response to the demands for justice, for the past and the present.

In conclusion, the signatories welcome the initiative of the Belgian Parliamentarians to take up the debate on the colonial period and to try to objectify what is at stake. However, ASF wishes to recall that only a holistic and inclusive process of justice is capable of healing the wounds of Belgian society in order for its different segments to live together harmoniously and to restore the dignity of the victims of Belgian colonisation in Africa.

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