

**7 April 2022**

**Speech by Kitty van der Heijden, Director-General for International Cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at Kwibuka in The Hague, in commemoration of the Rwandan genocide .**

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I'd like to thank Mrs SAFARI and Ambassador NDUHUNGIREHE for inviting me to Kwibuka in the Netherlands.

I'm especially grateful that we can meet in person today, after the previous two editions of Kwibuka in the Netherlands had to be held online. To be in the same room as you all, and to be able to commemorate the Rwandan genocide together, makes today's event all the more meaningful.

We are gathered here for the *International Day of Reflection on the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda*, as designated in the United Nations General Assembly resolution of the 26th of January 2018.

This day of commemoration is of great personal significance to me. From 1992 to 1994, I worked as the Desk Officer for Rwanda at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague. I visited Rwanda for the first time in August 1994. To be in Rwanda during that period was a life-changing experience for me.

The genocide destroyed the lives of countless Rwandans, including those of moderate Hutus and others who opposed the killings.

One day, I found myself standing alongside President Kagame at the side of a mass grave containing 8,000 bodies. The unforgettable smell of death was still in the air. I knew that people had been killing each other in that exact spot. The perpetrators and their victims were Rwandans who could have been each other's neighbours, friends, colleagues and even relatives. Somehow, the situation in Rwanda had reached a point where people who'd once been civilised and peaceful had now committed unspeakable crimes, victimising their own brothers and sisters.

As I stood beside that mass grave, I knew that we must never allow the circumstances that led to the genocide to arise again. The genocide was bred by fear and mistrust, both of which

were fuelled by propaganda. I decided that, as a representative of the government of the Netherlands, I wanted to help foster hope for the future, and mutual trust between people. This is the best way to prevent mass atrocities from happening again, anywhere in the world.

Since 1994, Rwanda's government and people have done a tremendous job of rebuilding their country. I'm proud that the Dutch government has assisted Rwanda in that process.

Immediately after the genocide, Rwanda and the Netherlands became development partners. The Netherlands was a major donor supporting the rebuilding of Rwanda's justice sector. We took on this role because we believe there can be no lasting peace without justice, and respect for human rights.

Our countries' bilateral development cooperation will come to a close at the end of this year. It's impressive that Rwanda has set itself the goal of becoming independent of foreign aid. Looking ahead, we will focus on stepping up mutual trade and investment. Of course, our future relationship will continue to involve a frank and constructive dialogue about justice and human rights. In fact, trade and investment will prosper only if the principles of the rule of law are adhered to, and human rights are respected. I look towards our common future with hope and confidence.

Despite the genocide in Rwanda, and despite the atrocities that are going on elsewhere in the world today, we should never lose faith in humanity.

And in that spirit I would like to close by sharing a quote by Anne Frank. She was a Dutch-German Jewish girl who perished in a Nazi concentration camp at the age of 16. In her diary, which became a global bestseller, she wrote the following:

'It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart.'

May these words offer a message of hope to all those working to build a peaceful future, in Rwanda and elsewhere.

Thank you.