

SPEECH BY CLR MPHO PARKS TAU, EXECUTIVE MAYOR OF JOHANNESBURG, AT THE ANNUAL NATIONAL CIVIC REMEMBRANCE SERVICE AND WREATH-LAYING CEREMONY: CENTENARY OF WORLD WAR 1, JOHANNESBURG, 9 NOVEMBER 2014.

Programme Director Dr. Mongezi Guma

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Fellow citizens

Good afternoon

This year marks the 100 anniversary of the start of World War 1, and our country pays tribute to the fallen heroes of this great calamity.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us all rise and observe a moment of silence in honour of all those who lost their lives during this terrible war.

Thank You

Ladies and gentlemen, our countrymen who enlisted for service in the First World War, the biggest since the Napoleonic Wars of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, came from a cross section of our society. They were children of the farm owners and farm workers, of the captains of industry and labourers, of the well off and the poor. They joined hands in what they understood, or hoped, was a struggle for world peace and democracy. They fought and died and were buried side by side wherever they were posted, be it South West Africa, France, East Africa or Palestine.

We must acknowledge that South African inequalities were reflected in the armed forces of the time; that racial divisions meant white soldiers bore firearms, that black soldiers did not. But in death black and white lie together, and we remember their sacrifice with deep sorrow and respect.

Programme Director, the end of the war in 1918 marked a sombre moment indeed for the entire world. The War robbed countries of their dearest citizens, especially the young men from whom so much had been hoped and who had so much to live for. It left a generation of widows and women mourning their sweethearts. Thousands of South Africans died in this war and are laid to rest in Commonwealth War Graves and other cemeteries throughout our African continent, the Middle East and Europe. Many more were terribly injured.

Many did not receive the dignified funerals that our customs require. This is another painful aspect of war. A case in point, which continues to bring sadness to our nation, is the sinking of the SS Mendi, carrying mainly black soldiers, in the English Channel on February 21, 1917. 607 of our soldiers died in this tragedy and were swallowed by the mighty seas, never to be seen again. The sinking of the SS Mendi remains one of the worst tragedies in South Africa's military history.

However, as the country, and as the City of Johannesburg, we have not forgotten our fallen heroes. We have gathered here today, both black and white, in this wreath-laying ceremony to commemorate the lives of our gallant soldiers who fought bravely in the First World War in what they considered to be the defence of our country. We honour them through this National Remembrance Sunday Service in the spirit of nation building, reconciliation and national healing.

With humility, we do so in this special place, at our Monument, specifically dedicated to our countrymen who died in the country's different conflicts including World War 1. The names of these fallen heroes are encrypted on the Memorial Wall at Freedom Park, in our neighbouring city of Tshwane, so that generations to come may learn of their heroism and sacrifice.

We gather here today, as do others in different parts of the world, also in remembrance of the fallen heroes of World War 1, to send a message to humanity that never again should the world go through such dreadful trials as the First World War and the appalling Second World War that followed it in 1939-1945.

In closing, I urge all of you here, to remember and keep in your hearts all those soldiers who died a century ago in the name of peace and freedom. And I ask you all to be peace ambassadors in the name of those from our country who fell in the First World War, and to rededicate ourselves in their honour to our country's 20 years of democracy and peace. We pray that our beloved country will never again be torn apart by such terrible events.

Thank You