

Congo: Myth-Busting: Dag Hammarskjöld, Katanga, and the coup against the Lumumba government

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A terrible myth has developed around the UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld, who died in a plane crash in 1961. Ludo De Witte explains that the UN chief was one of the architects of the Congo crisis that led to the removal and murder of the country's first leader, Patrice Lumumba. De Witte reveals the true role of the UN, and Hammarskjöld, in the imperialist catastrophe that savaged the Congo in 1960.



On an almost monthly basis the press, and scholars, focus on the death of UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld, in a plane crash near the Rhodesian town of Ndola, not far from the Congo-Katanga border, on the night of 17 - 18 September 1961. Accident or assassination attempt? And if it was an assassination, [who was guilty?](#)

These are questions to which the UN itself is seeking answers. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that the plane was shot down. If this is indeed the case, we must look for the perpetrators in what was then Katanga, a Congolese province which, shortly after Congo's independence, broke away from the central power with the powerful mining company Union Minière (Umicore) and local politicians in the entourage of Moïse Tshombe. This was done with the enthusiastic support of Belgium, which provided soldiers, diplomats, civil servants, and mercenaries to support the secession, with the aim of irreparably weakening Patrice Lumumba's central government.

It is not the crash and death of Dag Hammarskjöld - commonly known as 'Mr H' - that I am referring to here, but his role (and that of the UN) in the Congo Crisis. The United Nations is still a taboo subject in media circles. Critical remarks about UN operations are unwelcome, because for the West, and especially for a small country like Belgium, the organisation is a major instrument for influencing world politics.

Benefiting from the presumption that his plane was attacked by Katangese forces, the Secretary General has acquired the image of a man who had to pay with his life for his fight for a unified Congo. The Belgian paper *De Standaard* [puts it this way](#):

Officially, the Western powers could not support the secession of Katanga - that would run counter to a UN peacekeeping operation supporting the Congolese army in its fight

against Tshombe. But behind the scenes they were not above it. The UN's Number 1 was a thorn in their side. He was a little too zealous in his mission to reunify the Congo and put an end to the civil war in Katanga.

Is it really true that Hammarskjöld who led the peacekeeping force on the Security Council sent to the Congo were primarily aiming to re-establish a unitary state, against Western (mining) interests? Noble principles opposed to (neo)colonialism?

This view fits in perfectly with the myth of 'Mr H': posthumously acclaimed with the Nobel Peace Prize, he has become an icon of international pacifist diplomacy. The investigation carried out in the United Nations archives, the conclusions of which can be found in my book [Crisis in Congo](#) (1996), invalidates this myth. Hammarskjöld fully supported Katangese secession for as long as Patrice Lumumba was in power. And this, it should be noted, was done with a peacekeeping force who came to the Congo at the express request of the Congolese government to expel Belgian troops and put an end to Katanga's secession. The secession of rich Katanga – which accounted for two thirds of Congolese public revenue – was in the view of Belgium and the United States supposed to ruin the central state and contribute to Lumumba's downfall. The UN bureaucracy around Hammarskjöld made common cause with Brussels and Washington.

It was only after Lumumba's assassination (17 January 1961), when the nationalist threat had been averted, that the West changed sides. Secession, a weapon against the Lumumba government, had become superfluous. The United Nations Security Council put the reintegration of Katanga on the agenda (Security Council Resolution 161, 21 February 1961). It was only then that Mr H spoke out against secession, to the great displeasure of the diehards in Katanga, who dreamt of an eternal replica of apartheid South Africa in the heart of Africa. These diehards were to be found among the "colonial staff" of Union Minière; among the staff of the CIA, which continued to fully support secession; and among the Belgian and South-African mercenaries in the Katangese armed forces. A fine illustration of a genie that could not be squeezed back into its bottle: secession was not finally defeated until early 1963.

From the very first day of the Congo Crisis, Hammarskjöld and the United Nations were in league with Western forces, both before and after the assassination of Patrice Lumumba. To such an extent that without the actions of the United Nations, the overthrow of the Congolese government and its replacement by a meekly pro-Western regime would not have been on easy operation.

The popular imagery of the United Nations with its "civilian servants" as the embodiment of "the international community" on its way to a world of democracy, peace and human rights does not stand up to scrutiny in this case. The UN is a concentrated expression of global power relations, which in turn reinforces through its interventions. Just as it did in 1960-61, it continues to function today at the service of an imperialist system that ensures a net transfer of billions of dollars each year from [South to North](#), via interest transfers, capital flight and unfair trade in goods and raw materials.

By way of illustration, here are a few points that illustrate the complicity of the top bureaucrats of the United Nations in the establishment of the neo-colonial regime in the Congo. They are analysed in detail in my book *Crisis in Congo*, freely available in Dutch [here](#).

The list of UN and Hammarskjöld sanctioned interventions is impressive:

- July 1960: after the Belgian military intervention in the Congo and the secession of Katanga with the support of Belgian soldiers, shortly after independence, President Kasa Vubu and Prime Minister Lumumba requested the assistance of the United Nations for "the protection of

the national territory against the act of aggression by Belgian troops" (13 July). Mr H quickly had the UN force deployed, but not in Katanga, where the Belgians could quietly develop the secession.

- August 1960. Under pressure from the Congolese government and African public opinion, Mr H was finally forced to send peacekeepers to Katanga. But the UN Secretary General paid a prior visit to Katangan "President" Tshombe – the author of a coup d'état! – "to give Tshombe some form of guarantee that he would not jeopardise his personal political future or the legitimate objectives he was defending by accepting UN troops" (telegram from Mr H to his staff, 26 July). Hammarskjöld was in agreement with Washington and Brussels, who wanted to build a reorganised neo-colonial Congolese power around Katanga.
- During secret talks with Tshombe and his Belgian guardians, it was decided that peacekeepers would be sent to Katanga. Not to put an end to secession, but to "freeze" it. The "conflict" between Lumumba and Tshombe was considered to be "a constitutional political conflict that should be the subject of negotiations between the two parties". The UN would remain outside these discussions. The UN force could not be used to bring the Tshombe regime to power, and the Congolese government was forbidden to use UN facilities to bring civilian or military personnel to Katanga against Tshombe's wishes. From that moment on, the United Nations formed not only a political but also a military buffer between the Congolese government and the Katangese authorities. Moreover, the Belgian soldiers in Katanga did not leave, rather they donned "Katangese" uniforms the small secessionist army of Katanga.
- 9 August 1960. UN support for Katanga's secession prompted Forminière, a Société Générale subsidiary that mined diamonds, to separate South Kasai from the central government as well. Lumumba had no choice but to send Congolese troops to Kasai and Katanga. The capital of Kasai was quickly taken, but Hammarskjöld positioned peacekeepers on the borders of Katanga to prevent Tshombe's downfall.
- A telegram dated 26 August from the US mission to the UN states that Hammarskjöld was more convinced than ever that Lumumba had to be "broken". Hammarskjöld took up the theme again in a telegram dated 1 September: "There is a page that must be turned and it is that of Lumumba, Gizenga and Gbenye with their totally erroneous interpretation of their rights concerning the United Nations and their role in the world".
- Early September 1960. Hammarskjöld sent a man he trusted, the American Andrew Cordier, to the Congo. Before joining the UN, Cordier had been a top bureaucrat from the US State Department. He discussed the overthrow of the Lumumba government with President Kasa Vubu's entourage. A coup d'état, since under the Congolese constitution the president had only a ceremonial function. Under the constitution, it was up to the National Assembly to appoint or dismiss the government, and Lumumba had a majority there. In a telegram to Cordier, Mr H encouraged the coup. He referred to a "state of emergency" and told Cordier that he "could allow himself to do on the ground what, within the framework of imperative principles, I could not justify if I did it myself: to run the risk of not being recognised when it hardly matters any more".
- On 5 September, President Kasa Vubu read a statement on Congolese radio in which he dismissed Lumumba. But Prime Minister Lumumba retained the support of parliament. The reaction was swift: on 14 September Commander-in-Chief Mobutu suspended parliament. The UN's support for Kasa Vubu and Mobutu was decisive. The UN force closed the radio station and airports in the Congolese capital, preventing Lumumba from mobilising supporters and friendly troops. In a telegram, Hammarskjöld revealed that the United States had made US\$1m available to UN officers to pay the wages and food of Congolese army units that chose to side with Kasa Vubu and Mobutu. This did not escape the attention of the pro-Western press, as The Times wrote: "So there you have the UN, apparently in the middle as always, but obviously leaning in one direction".
- From 10 October 1960, Mobutu's troops permanently surrounded Lumumba's residence.

Lumumba was “protected” by a double cordon of soldiers: the first circle consisted of the blue helmets “protecting” him; the outer circle, soldiers of the Congolese army, who wanted to arrest him. The encirclement was in response to the wishes of the neo-colonial coalition, which wanted to cut Lumumba off from his base. Lumumba had become a political exile in his own country. The US ambassador to Congo, Clare H. Timberlake, wrote in a reassuring telegram that Lumumba’s physical isolation meant his “political death”. Rajeshwar Dayal, the head of the ONUC (United Nations Operation in the Congo), told Hammarskjöld: “Lumumba is in fact a virtual prisoner in his house, with no free contact with anyone and no telephone”.

- End of November 1960. Under massive pressure from the West, the UN General Assembly recognises Kasa Vubu’s delegation as the Congo’s legal representative. Having lost all faith in the UN, the dismissed prime minister left his residence incognito. With a few loyal followers, he tried to reach Stanleyville, where the nationalist forces were regrouping. But on the way he fell into the hands of Mobutu’s troops, which led to his death six weeks later. UN documents indicate that the UN was responsible for the arrest of the prime minister. Lumumba, pursued by Mobutu’s troops in the Kasai, called on Ghanaian peacekeepers to intervene. The latter wanted to take him under their protection, but their officers forbade them to do so, whereupon Lumumba fell into Mobutu’s hands. Shortly before, General Von Horn, supreme commander of the UN forces in Congo, had ordered the Ghanaian peacekeepers not to protect Lumumba: “I repeat, no action can be taken by you concerning Lumumba. We were responsible for his personal security only in his house in Leopoldville. We always considered and made it known that it was at his own risk that he would venture to leave his house”. A copy of this telegram of 1 December was sent to New York.
- After Lumumba’s death, Hammarskjöld lied to the Security Council about Lumumba’s arrest and the role played by the United Nations: “Lumumba (...) was arrested in the country without the UN having the slightest possibility of opposing it, given that it had no control over the situation” (statement of 15 February 1961).
- On 17 January Lumumba and his comrades Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito were taken to Katanga in a DC-4 plane. They were tortured during the flight. At 5 p.m. they were dragged onto the tarmac at Elisabethville and handed over to Belgian officers and their troops. One Belgian officer described the prisoners as “a human mass (...), their shirts in tatters, blood at the corners of their mouths, their faces swollen, shattered, exhausted, more dead than alive”. The Swedish UN troops watched from a distance. That day, the ONUC guard consisted of six soldiers, under the command of NCO Lindgren, who wrote a report on the events. Four hours after their arrival, the three nationalist leaders were dead.

The UN in no way hindered the action of the regime in Katanga and the Belgians who were manoeuvring to carry out the murder of Lumumba. The UN chief in Katanga, New Zealander Ian Berendsen, later said that he had been informed of the arrival of Lumumba, Mpolo and Okito “one or two hours” after the DC-4 had landed by NCO Lindgren. But the local UN chief did not bother to put pressure on Tshombe or the Katangese army leadership. It was only on 18 January, and then only in passing, that Berendsen mentioned it to Tshombe. In a letter to Tshombe dated 19 January, ostensibly only written ‘for the record’, Hammarskjöld did not demand the release of the three, nor their transfer to the Congolese capital; he only asked for their humane treatment. But by then it was already too late to influence events.

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