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How the UN and Canada colluded to kill Lumumba

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The United Nations, then under Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld, and Canada played key roles in the assassination of popular Congolese Prime Minister and eminent African statesman Patrice Lumumba. To Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, Lumumba was a “major threat to Western interests”. Neither the UN nor Ottawa has ever accepted responsibility.

Fifty-six years ago today the United Nations launched a peacekeeping force that contributed to one of the worst post-independence imperial crimes in Africa. The Organisation des Nations Unies au Congo (ONUC) delivered a major blow to Congolese aspirations by undermining elected Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba. Canada played a significant role in ONUC and in Lumumba’s assassination, which should be studied by progressives demanding Ottawa increase its participation in UN “peacekeeping”.

After seven decades of brutal rule, Belgium organized a hasty independence in the hopes of maintaining control over the Congo’s vast natural resources. When Lumumba was elected to pursue a genuine de-colonization, Brussels instigated a secessionist movement in the eastern part of the country. In response, the Congolese Prime Minister asked the UN for a peacekeeping force to protect the territorial integrity of the newly independent country. Washington, however, saw the UN mission as a way to undermine Lumumba.

Siding with Washington, Ottawa promoted ONUC and UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld's controversial anti-Lumumba position. 1,900 Canadian troops participated in the UN mission between 1960 and 1964, making this country's military one of its more active members. There were almost always more Canadian officers at ONUC headquarters than those of any other nationality and the Canadians were concentrated in militarily important logistical positions including chief operations officer and chief signals officer.

Canada's strategic role wasn't simply by chance. Ottawa pushed to have Canada's intelligence gathering signals detachments oversee UN intelligence and for Quebec Colonel Jean Berthiaume to remain at UN headquarters to "maintain both Canadian and Western influence." (A report from the Canadian Directorate of Military Intelligence noted, "Lumumba's immediate advisers... have referred to Lt. Col. Berthiaume as an 'imperialist tool'.")

To bolster the power of ONUC, Ottawa joined Washington in channeling its development assistance to the Congo through the UN. Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah complained that this was "applying a restriction to Congo which does not apply to any other African state." Ottawa rejected Nkrumah's request to channel Congolese aid through independent African countries.

Unlike many ONUC participants, Canada aggressively backed Hammarskjöld's controversial anti-Lumumba position. External Affairs Minister Howard Green told the House of Commons: "The Canadian government will continue its firm support for the United Nations effort in the Congo and for Mr. Hammarskjöld, who in the face of the greatest difficulty has served the high principles and purposes of the charter with courage, determination and endless patience."

Ottawa supported Hammarskjöld even as he sided with the Belgian-backed secessionists against the central government. On August 12 1960 the UN Secretary General traveled to Katanga and telegraphed secessionist leader Moïse Tshombe to discuss "deploying United Nations troops to Katanga." Not even Belgium officially recognized Katanga's independence, provoking Issaka Soure to note that, "[Hammarskjöld's visit] sent a very bad signal by implicitly implying that the rebellious province could somehow be regarded as sovereign to the point that the UN chief administrator could deal with it directly."

The UN head also worked to undermine Lumumba within the central government. When President Joseph Kasavubu dismissed Lumumba as prime minister — a move of debatable legality and opposed by the vast majority of the country's parliament — Hammarskjöld publicly endorsed the dismissal of a politician who a short time earlier had received the most votes in the country's election.

Lumumba attempted to respond to his dismissal with a nationwide broadcast, but UN forces blocked him from accessing the main radio station. ONUC also undermined Lumumba in other ways. Through their control of the airport ONUC prevented his forces from flying into the capital from other parts of the country and closed the airport to Soviet weapons and transportation equipment when Lumumba turned to Russia for assistance. In addition, according to *The Cold War* "[the Secretary General's special representative Andrew] Cordier provided \$1 million — money supplied to the United Nations by the US government — to [military

commander Joseph] Mobutu in early September to pay off restive and hungry Congolese soldiers and keep them loyal to Kasavubu during his attempt to oust Lumumba as prime minister.”

To get a sense of Hammarskjöld’s antipathy towards the Congolese leader, he privately told officials in Washington that Lumumba must be “broken” and only then would the Katanga problem “solve itself.” For his part, Cordier asserted “[Ghanaian president Kwame] Nkrumah is the Mussolini of Africa while Lumumba is its little Hitler.”

(Echoing this thinking, in a conversation with External Affairs Minister Howard Green, Prime Minister John Diefenbaker called Lumumba a “major threat to Western interests” and said he was “coming around to the conclusion” that an independent Western oriented Katanga offered “the best solution to the current crisis.”)

In response to Hammarskjöld’s efforts to undermine his leadership, Lumumba broke off relations with the UN Secretary General. He also called for the withdrawal of all white peacekeepers, which Hammarskjöld rejected as a threat to UN authority.

A number of ONUC nations ultimately took up Lumumba’s protests. When the Congolese prime minister was overthrown and ONUC helped consolidate the coup, the United Arab Republic (Egypt), Guinea, Morocco and Indonesia formally asked Hammarskjöld to withdraw all of their troops.

Canadian officials took a different position. They celebrated ONUC’s role in Lumumba’s overthrow. A week after Lumumba was pushed out prominent Canadian diplomat Escott Reid, then ambassador to Germany, noted in an internal letter, “already the United Nations has demonstrated in the Congo that it can in Africa act as the executive agent of the free world.” The “free world” was complicit in the murder of one of Africa’s most important independence leaders. In fact, the top Canadian in ONUC directly enabled his killing.

After Lumumba escaped house arrest and fled Leopoldville for his power base in the Eastern Orientale province, Colonel Jean Berthiaume assisted Lumumba’s political enemies by helping recapture him. The UN Chief of Staff, who was kept in place by Ottawa, tracked the deposed prime minister and informed Joseph Mobutu of Lumumba’s whereabouts.

Three decades later the Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec, born Berthiaume told an interviewer: “I called Mobutu. I said, ‘Colonel, you have a problem, you were trying to retrieve your prisoner, Mr. Lumumba. I know where he is, and I know where he will be tomorrow. He said, what do I do? It’s simple, Colonel, with the help of the UN you have just created the core of your para commandos — we have just trained 30 of these guys — highly selected Moroccans trained as paratroopers. They all jumped — no one refused. To be on the safe side, I put our [Canadian] captain, Mario Coté, in the plane, to make sure there was no underhandedness. In any case, it’s simple, you take a Dakota [plane], send your paratroopers and arrest Lumumba in that small village — there is a runway and all that is needed. That’s all you’ll need to do, Colonel. He arrested him, like that, and I never regretted it.”

Ghanaian peacekeepers near where Lumumba was captured took quite a different attitude towards the elected prime minister's safety. After Mobutu's forces captured Lumumba they requested permission to intervene and place Lumumba under UN protection. Unfortunately, the Secretary-General denied their request. Not long thereafter Lumumba was executed by firing squad and his body was dissolved in acid.

In 1999 Belgium launched a parliamentary inquiry into its role in Lumumba's assassination. Following Belgium's lead, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs should investigate Canada's role in the Congolese independence leader's demise and any lessons ONUC might hold regarding this country's participation in future UN missions.