

Congo & Patrice Lumumba: Still no light in the heart of darkness after 50 years

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Killing democracy in Congo: Eamonn McCann marks the 50th anniversary of the murder of the Congo's first democratically elected prime minister, Patrice Lumumba.

Yesterday's 50th anniversary of the killing of Patrice Lumumba has put a new focus on the wars still raging in the Congo. The conflicts in the Congo today amount to what's probably the most horrible war in the world.

As many as five million may have died in the last 15 years, mostly from disease and malnutrition, perhaps a million from guns, bombing and machetes.

Underlying the wars are the same issues that led to Lumumba and two of his officials, Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito, being put up one at a time against a tree in a forest clearing outside Elizabethville (now Lubumbashi) and gunned to death. It happened late at night on January 17, 1961.

Prime Minister Lumumba was the first freely-elected leader in the country's history. He lasted only seven months. At stake - or so the Western powers, especially Belgium and the US, had come to believe - was control of the Congo's vast natural resources. There was also the strategic importance of denying the Soviet Union decisive influence in a major African country in the era of the Cold War.

Massacre, slavery and abuse of human rights had been a feature of resource exploitation in the Congo since the first colonial incursion in the 18th century. In the last third of the 19th century, Belgium's King Leopold annexed the country as his personal fiefdom to enslave the people and rob its rubber and ivory. Recalcitrant workers were casually killed. Many were knifed or clubbed to death and their hands brought back to the centres of commerce to win a bounty and show that a bullet hadn't been wasted.

Adam Hochschild's brilliant, sickening book, *King Leopold's Ghost*, provides a detailed account of the almost unexampled savagery of Belgian rule.

Lumumba was a travelling salesman and post office clerk who helped found the Mouvement National Congolais (MNC) in 1958. The MNC won national elections in May 1960. Lumumba was declared Prime Minister the following month. Independence Day came on June 30, the ceremony attended by King Baudouin and an array of dignitaries. In his speech, Baudouin celebrated colonialism and spoke of the country's debt to the "genius" of his great grand-uncle Leopold.

Lumumba, enraged, took to the microphone: "No Congolese will ever forget that it was by fighting that (independence) was won ... It was indispensable to put an end to the humiliating slavery

imposed on us by force.”

He is said to have ended: “Nous ne sommes plus vos macaques! (We are no longer your monkeys.)” It may be he sealed his fate there and then.

Eleven days later, regional leader Moïse Tshombe seized control of the mineral-rich province Katanga, supported by the Brussels government and backed by mining companies, most importantly Union Minière. The country was being dismembered almost at birth. Soldiers under Belgian officers enforced the secession.

The United Nations sent in an international force including an Irish contingent. Conor Cruise O’Brien was the UN’s political officer, and behaved with great honour throughout. But the UN, under pressure from the Eisenhower administration in Washington, backed away from confronting Tshombe. O’Brien resigned in protest.

On December 14, the Security Council voted 8-2 against a Soviet resolution supporting Lumumba. By this time, the elected prime minister had been arrested at gunpoint and flown to Leopoldville (now Kinshasa) and put in jail. On January 17, he was taken bound and gagged to Elizabethville in Katanga and handed into the custody of Tshombe’s forces. Hours later he was murdered.

In 1975, a US Senate Committee under Frank Church of Idaho found that the killing had been ordered by CIA chief Allen Dulles as “an urgent and prime objective”. In a whistle-blowing interview in 2000, the National Security Council minute-taker at the time, Robert Johnston, revealed that Eisenhower had said “something (to Dulles) to the effect that Lumumba should be eliminated”.

In 2002, a Belgian Commission found no evidence that Belgium had been directly involved.

Thus potentially the richest country in Africa was plunged into secessionist war in the scramble by outside powers for its wealth. Same as it ever was and, in large measure, still is. Blood diamonds, blood coltan, blood copper, blood tin, blood gold.

No account of how Congo became and remains sodden with blood can be complete without reference to the horror of the murder almost exactly 50 years ago of Patrice Lumumba.

By Eamonn McCann

P.S.

* From the Belfast Telegraph, Wednesday, 19 January 2011:

<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/eamon-mccann/still-no-light-in-the-heart-of-darkness-after-50-years-15057194.html>