

François Soudan, 14 septembre 2016

Who killed UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld?

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has vowed to shed light on the death of his predecessor whose DC-6 plane crashed on September 18, 1961, on the border between the Congo and what is now Zambia. Was this a simple plane crash or the result of a bombing guided by Western powers? Before he leaves office in December, Ban Ki-moon seems determined to finally reach the truth on the death fifty-five years ago of one of his predecessors, Dag Hammarskjöld of Sweden. A mystery that must be solved

In his report to the UN General Assembly, as confirmed by Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson, Ban Ki-moon will ask for support for the appointment of an 'eminent person' to review new documents related to the mysterious crash of the DC-6 *Albertina* on 17/18 September 1961, near Ndola airport on the border between Congo and Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia.

In following up the original Hammarskjöld Commission, a panel of experts led by Tanzanian Minister of Justice Mohamed Othman, concluded that pilot error was not the only possible cause of the accident, as did the Commission.

The challenge to protect Katanga Uranium

The tragedy which killed sixteen people came days after the start of Operation Morthor, the offensive by UN forces against secessionist Katanga led by Moïse Tshombe. This was to the great displeasure of the USA, the UK, South Africa and Belgian mining interests fearful of seeing Katanga's uranium resources falling into the hands of the Congolese government.

Less than a year after the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, in which the CIA had played a decisive role, the idea of an independent Katanga under western influence worried Washington and its allies. But Hammarskjöld firmly opposed this, leading to his flight to meet Tshombe in Ndola. Witnesses recall the attack

For fifty years, researchers had been collecting evidence, unable to cross-check details such as the report of a farmer who claimed to see a fireball crashing into the forest. Also, a retired US NSA agent based in Cyprus who claimed to have heard messages from a Belgian fighter pilot claiming to have shot down the DC-6.

Also that the sole survivor of the crash, the American Harold Julien, very badly burned, who before dying, shared with British police that there had been an explosion on board before the crash.

In 1998, new evidence was found following the work of the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation held in South Africa. This included testimony by former heads of the secret services of the apartheid regime including mention of a covert operation run by the South African Institute for Maritime Research (ARWIS), which in the early 1960s was charged to liquidate Soviet agents found in the region, on behalf of the CIA and MI5.

Supporting this claim, records of top secret meetings in mid-1961 between agents from South Africa, the UK and USA refer to reports of a term attributed to CIA Director Allen Dulles in which he stated, "Dag has become the source of problems; we must clear it." The code name for the planned attack was "Heavenly operation".

The "Dag" file reveals new information

Readers of the August issue of *Foreign Policy* will know that South African authorities have recently notified Ban Ki-moon about newly found documents on the activities of ARWIS in Katanga in early 1960, which might shed light on the disappearance of Hammarskjöld.

These documents have led the Secretary General to reopen the investigation and to press the United States and the United Kingdom to declassify their records. However, both have refused, describing their possible involvement as no more than "complicit theories".

Justice Richard Goldstone, a member of the Hammarskjöld Commission has stated that "it is highly likely that these two countries have the transcripts and recordings of exchanges, both inside the cockpit between the pilots and with the Ndola control tower during the minutes before the catastrophe."

So why are these countries not making their records public? Ban Ki-moon would like to know the answer! However, many will recognise that the man President Kennedy called "the greatest statesman of the twentieth century", and who embodied more than any other UN Secretary General a degree of the autonomy and independence of powerful states, he paid dearly with his own life at the age of 56.

"Mr. H" and us

Dag Hammarskjöld's death caused great concern in the then Third World. Africa-based journals covered the story, led by Bechir Ben Yahmed of *Africa Action*, to be renamed *Jeune Afrique* a year later. Appointed to the United Nations in 1953, Mr 'H' provided the cover story for its first issue on 17 October, 1960 published in Tunis.

Filing from New York for that issue, Jean Daniel wrote a long portrait of the Swede, describing him as a 'great sporting monk', dark-skinned with piercing blue eyes, who would rather listen than talk, and making sure that those he spoke to felt included rather than dominated'. Colonial France, imperial Britain, the United States and the USSR during the Cold War did not take to this reserved character, so focused, seemingly insensitive to familiarities. But he was the "common denominator among all races and peoples of the world", said Daniel, more close to Bourguiba, Nehru and Nkrumah than to de Gaulle, Khrushchev and Eisenhower.

A week after he died, it was the great militant writer Jean Rous who penned his tribute in the 51st issue of *Africa Action*. Lawyer, former colleague of Leon Trotsky, former resistance leader (and future adviser to Léopold Senghor), Rous inserts as an epigraph in his article a line by English revolutionary writer Tom Paine: "My country is the world and my religion is to do well."

The continuing investigation evokes memories of the danger of mercenaries from France, Belgium and South Africa, all prepared to serve the Katanga secessionist leadership and this also reminds us of the death of Dag Hammarskjöld, a 'citizen of the world'. Fifty-five years later, that concern remains with us, as relevant as ever.

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