

United Nations Association

Westminster Branch

Campaigning for a strong, credible and effective UN



25 April 2019

That UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld and others died in a plane crash while seeking peace was a tragedy. That, after nearly 60 years, some UN member states seek to cover up the incident is a scandal which together we should seek to expose.



At a meeting in the House of Lords, London, on 25 April, speakers will reaffirm their determination that the current UN Inquiry into the death of Dag Hammarskjöld must be pursued, especially as revelation of new evidence supports this. Judge Mohamed Chande Othman, former Chief Justice of Tanzania and the UN's 'Eminent Person' tasked to review both old and newly uncovered evidence observed in his report (October 2017) that

"Far from approaching the possible limit of our understanding, the deeper we have gone into the searches, the more relevant information has been found."

Recent developments in several countries support that observation. However, Judge Othman must submit his final report in July providing time for the UN Secretary-General to prepare his recommendations for presentation to the UN General Assembly in September 2019. At the meeting, speakers will set out to raise wide public support for the continuation of the UN inquiry as many believe that some UN Member States aim to close it down.

In identifying what is needed to ensure the continuation of the UN inquiry, speakers will put into context how the accompanying cost could be justified, noting the scope of the current inquiry in which Judge Othman and his staff pursue the truth, dealing with sometimes unhelpful governments. His work covers the crash and events which took place in British colonial Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia, thus of special interest to this country and neighbouring the Congo, two-thirds the size of Western Europe, engaged in a conflict involving powerful states, colonial and non-colonial, UN peacekeeping contingents from 21 countries, and extending over a long period. The inquiry's budget is US\$321k inclusive of translation of the report into other UN languages. By comparison, the UK government-funded inquiry *Operation Resolve* which tackled the Hillsborough Football Stadium tragedy cost £56.5m, while the parallel Independent Police Complaints Commission's investigation into allegations of a police 'cover-up' following the tragedy cost over £42m. (*Yorkshire Post*, 29 June 2017). The financial capability of the UN's Member States to continue the Hammarskjöld inquiry is not in doubt. What is in doubt is their resolve to do so.

Where should we expect this resolve to show itself? Firstly, at the United Nations itself. In September 2017, UN Secretary-General António Guterres wrote:

'It remains our shared responsibility to pursue the full truth concerning the conditions and circumstances resulting in the tragic death of former Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld and of the members of the party accompanying him. I consider this to be our solemn duty to my illustrious and distinguished predecessor, Dag Hammarskjöld, to the other members of the party accompanying him and to their families.'

At the London meeting, speakers will urge Mr Guterres to reaffirm that commitment as did former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. After all, this matter is as much a test of the United Nations system itself. They will state that we owe it to the deceased, to their families and relatives, and to the wider global community, to undertake everything possible to establish the truth. To those who insist it is a waste of time to review such events from history, the injustice felt at the time still resonates today and at a time when critics of the UN System and its Member States challenge its determination to manifest the principle of transparency, it is on such issues that it and they will be judged.

Judge Othman has encountered differing degrees of cooperation from those states he believes retain information which can assist him. He initially requested that relevant Member States appoint independent and high-ranking officials to review the records of their security and intelligence agencies, and then to report back on their findings and obstacles encountered. Belgium, France, Germany, Sweden and Canada have now all agreed to this. Russia and the United States have directed civil servants - hardly independent - to this task and the UK and South Africa have refused to respond at all to Judge Othman's request before the notified closing date. In late 2018, he extended his requests to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Portugal and Angola. Only Angola has yet to identify its independent and high-ranking individual. All appointed officials will experience different challenges and it was proposed they meet to provide collegiate assistance. If the inquiry's budget cannot stretch to cover flights and accommodation, a video conference, with all its shortcomings, could be an option.

Also, pressure must be exerted on those states which are lagging in their support. In the UK, UNA Westminster continues to draw attention to the discrepancy between the UK's claim to be an exemplary UN Member State and its recalcitrant attitude towards the Inquiry. It awaits a full response to its recent Freedom of Information request to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) asking for all recorded information relating to the UN Secretary-General's request to the UK Government to appoint a high ranking and independent official. The FCO's holding reply states that the information requested is exempt from disclosure as it relates to the formulation or development of policy, and national security. A final response is awaited, and this may trigger an appeal to the Information Commissioner, seeking an independent ruling on the matter. By that time, Judge Othman's mandate from the UN will have expired - an outcome, some suggest, the UK seeks to secure.

Efforts will be made to secure a response from South Africa, currently a member of the UN Security Council. That its post-apartheid government appears to be protecting its predecessor continues to puzzle all observers. Also, attention will be directed towards the activities of the United States during the original Congo crisis. Throughout the UN's inquiries, the US State Department has proved evasive, sometime in an amateur manner. Some believe it retains recorded aural messages which would assist the Judge's inquiry.

The imminent publication of *"Ils ont tué Monsieur H"* (Maurin Picard, French only) promises interesting new information which will raise national awareness in France where there has been little debate to date but whose mercenaries were deeply involved in the Congo at the time of Hammarskjöld's death. Also, African states, led by the African Union, should ensure that support for the inquiry is sustained at and beyond the General Assembly in September.

In reaffirming general commitment to press for the continuation of the UN inquiry, reference must be made to Dag Hammarskjöld himself, noting that, despite his failures and setbacks, his brand of diplomacy offered important lessons for mediators today. He had been widely praised for the UN's role in the Suez crisis of 1956 but the Congo crisis, resulting in the largest UN peace operation to date and continuing today, presented different challenges.

These are the challenges which those who founded the United Nations in 1945 were determined it would tackle in the name of all humanity. As long as the deaths of Dag Hammarskjöld and those with him remain unresolved, its mission remains incomplete, an unfulfilled challenge. If its Member States, especially those proclaiming that determination in 1945, fail in this duty, they betray those vows to this and to succeeding generations.

For updates, follow www.hammarskjoldinquiry.info