

“Hell on Earth”: Understanding War and Conflict in the Congo

Part 1: Independence

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Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

The ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a long one, marked with political intrigue among nations, outside influences, ethnic tensions, and staggering amounts of violence. It is something that is often ignored in the mainstream media – even among the Obama-era ‘humanitarian interventions’ – even though it is the theater of the deadliest post-WW2 conflict (over three million people have died and many are still dying). [1] The Congo has become a hell on earth; and to understand how the situation became as it is, a historical examination of the nation is needed and overdue.

Colonial Rule

Having been quite late getting into the Great Game, Belgium moved with purpose in the early 1900s in trying to acquire an African colony. In 1906, the Belgians annexed the Congo, making two separate zones: Belgian Congo and the Congo Free States, the latter of which became King Leopold’s own personal fiefdom where he had complete control. His forces engaged in horrific acts such as holding “the [families] of [men] hostage until they returned with their rubber quota. Those who refused or failed to supply enough rubber often had their villages burned down, children murdered, and their hands cut off.” [2] Leopold’s main concern was the ivory and rubber trades. Eventually, the atrocities that occurred under his watch became widely known and he was forced to fold the CFS into the Belgian Congo. It was among this time that Congolese became politically awakened and active, namely in Leopoldville.

Before discussing the political awakening in Leopoldville, it would be pertinent to first understand the economic situation of the Congo. During World War 2, the Congo was “an important source of raw materials, especially of copper, tin, industrial diamonds, rubber, and palm oil.” Afterward, due to the ever-increasing price of raw materials, the Congo economy expanded greatly: “In 1952 the value of exports was put at 20,000 million francs – an increase of 88 per cent as compared with 1948 – and by 1956 it had reached 28,000 million francs.” [3] However, almost a decade later, a global decrease in the prices of the same raw materials caused the economy to stagger and created a large increase in unemployment (from 4,300 in September 1957 to 16,000 in March 1958), particularly in the Katanga region, a significant mining location.

While this economic downturn contributed to the political awakening of the Congolese, they had already become politically active. In January 1945, the first indigenous newspaper, La Voix du Congolais (The Voice of Congo), appeared in Leopoldville; and in 1955, Conscience Africaine was introduced. In July of the following year, the Conscience published a manifesto which suggested that within 30 years the Congo should be independent. Several weeks

later, “a cultural association of the Lower Congo, known as ABAKO (founded in 1950), led by M. Joseph Kasavubu, improved on the ‘manifesto’, demanding complete and immediate emancipation and entirely rejecting the idea of a thirty-year preparatory period.” [4] This political awakening soon manifested itself in the Leopoldville riots.

Though the riots became political, they were economic in origin. Due to the decline in the prices of raw materials, the budget dropped to a 5 million-pound deficit in 1957, and tripled to 15 million pounds in 1958. In the face of runaway unemployment, the government denied there were any problems. On January 4, 1959, following economic turmoil and the government’s refusal to recognize such, riots ensued and lasted for three days. The force publique (the gendarmerie) was used to prevent the rioters from entering the European town.

These riots forced the Belgian political establishment to acknowledge that there were in fact a multitude of problems, and to embrace reform. In seven months, “from January to August, forty acts and ordinances containing discriminatory regulations were abolished or changed,” although discrimination still remained in the European towns. The Congo was given a charter of freedom and, “for the first time, freedom of assembly, of the press, and of speech was finally recognized.”[5] Local elections formed and the first municipal elections took place in Leopoldville and several other towns in late 1957 and early 1958. Also in 1958, the Congolese National Movement political party was formed by Patrice Lumumba. The Movement focused on Congolese nationalism and created a large political rift in domestic Congolese politics, “[dividing] those who [wished] for a strong unitary state from those wanting a federal system of largely autonomous provincial governments based on primary [ethnic] alliances.” [6] After the riots, three Abako leaders, including Kasavubu, were arrested and flown to Belgium to face trial – a trial that would only worsen the racial tensions in the colony.

Independence

The move to reform forced a decision by the Belgian government to hold a roundtable conference in January 1960, which allowed for face-to-face meetings with Congolese political leaders. At the conference, “the Congolese delegates had presented a common front in their desire for immediate independence, no matter how divided they were on other issues,” and the Belgians awarded the Congo full independence on June 30, 1960. However, the Belgian government limited this independence to the political realm. Economically, the intent was to retain the Congo “as a neo-colonial country whose resources would be exploited for the development of Belgian and West European economies, and the continued underdevelopment of the Congo.” [7]

Nevertheless, the announcement resulted in a scramble to form political parties. The result was that in May 1960, “Of the seven major ‘parties’ in the Congo, none gained enough seats in the election to assure it of even 30 percent of the votes in the Chamber of Representatives. Patrice Lumumba, whose MNC party won some 38 of the 137 seats, emerged as leader of the largest single bloc.” Of the other parties, “the Abako, under Joseph Kasavubu, the Conakat party of Katanga, led by Moïse Tshombe, and a dissident wing of the MNC led by Albert Kalondji in Kasai Province, together garnered about 27 votes, but were allied chiefly by their growing opposition to a tightly centralized, unitary type of government.”[8] Ultimately, the philosophical conflict between having a centralized government versus a nation of largely autonomous provinces was a major source of division

in the formation of the new Congolese government.

A spat between Kasavubu's Abako party and Lumumba's MNC quickly escalated. Based on the weak elections of the MNC, the Belgian Resident Minister allowed Lumumba to look into forming a coalition government. However, Lumumba was unsuccessful as he was unable to persuade Kasavubu and his Abako party to join him, thus the offer was given to Kasavubu. Lumumba refused to work with the Abako party. On June 20th, it was reported that "a 'deal' was apparently taking shape, whereby Mr. Lumumba would head the Government as Premier and Mr. Kasavubu would become Chief of State." [9] Lumumba would eventually become Premier of the Congo, after being offered the Premiership by the Belgians; however, more drama was to come in the form of a military mutiny, two secessions, and a UN intervention.

Endnotes

[1] Integrated Regional Information Networks, DRC: Conflict Deadliest Since World War II - Aid Agency, <http://www.irinnews.org/report/42969/drc-conflict-deadliest-since-world-war-ii-aid-agency> (April 8, 2003)

[2] Yale University Genocide Studies Program, Congo Free State, 1885-1908, http://www.yale.edu/gsp/colonial/belgian_congo/index.html (2010)

[3] Majory Taylor, "The Belgian Congo Today: Background to the Leopoldville Riots," *The World Today* 15:9 (1959), pg 354

[4] Taylor, pg 358

[5] Colin Legum, *Congo Disaster* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1961, pg 59

[6] Legum, pg 66

[7] Omajuwa Igbo Natuf, "The Cold War and the Congo Crisis, 1960-1961," *Africa: Quarterly Review of Studies and Documentation of the Italian Institute for AFRICAE the East* 39:3 (1984), pg 358

[8] Byron Fairchild, *The Congo 1960*, Historical Division Joint Chiefs of Staff, http://www.dod.mil/pubs/foi/International_security_affairs/africa/415.pdf (July 1961)

[9] Ibid

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