

United Nations Mission in the Congo (ONUC)

Congo (1960-4)

Although post-Westphalian enforcement is often regarded as a phenomenon that started in the 1990s UN peacekeepers used significant amounts of force in the Congo in the early 1960s. The crisis in the Congo demonstrates how a combination of hasty (Belgian) decolonization, state fragility, weakness of central government authority, and ethnic and regional fragmentation drew the UN into using force against a secessionist movement and foreign mercenaries, and covertly supporting the overthrow of the elected Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba (see Abi-Saab 1978; Higgins 1980; Gibbs 2000).

On 30 June 1960 the Congo gained its independence from Belgium. Only five days later, however, the Congolese army mutinied, causing extensive civil unrest, which included a number of attacks against Belgian citizens. In response to these attacks, on 11 July Belgium deployed paratroopers without the consent of the Congolese government. To make matters more complicated, on the very same day, local politician Moïse Tshombé declared Katanga, Congo's most mineral-rich province, to be independent, and the following month South Kasai also attempted to secede. It soon became apparent that Tshombé had considerable support from both the Belgian government and the vast industrial mining complex Union Minière du Haut-Katanga, headquartered in Brussels (Gibbs 2000: 366-9; UN 1990: 239).

In response to Belgium's intervention, both President Kasavubu and Prime Minister Lumumba called upon the UN to send military assistance, declaring that Belgium had committed an act of aggression against the Congo. Invoking Article 99 of the Charter, Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld called an urgent meeting of the Security Council. The Security Council agreed with the Congolese government and in

Resolution 143 of 14 July 1960 called for Belgium to withdraw its troops. The Council authorized the deployment of a peacekeeping force, ONUC, which included troops from 30 states and at its peak, in July 1961, comprised 19,828 soldiers and some 2,000 civilian experts and technicians.

ONUC personnel were initially intended to act as peacekeepers to oversee the withdrawal of Belgian troops and to help the Congolese government restore law and order; they were not supposed to get involved with Congolese politics in general and the Katangan secession in particular. But this is precisely what happened. Arguably, this was because ONUC's underlying goal was to restore an acceptable degree of Westphalian order by maintaining Congo's territorial integrity, peacefully if possible but by force if necessary (James 1990: 296; Howard 2000: 68). Although Belgian troops quickly withdrew from the majority of Congolese territory, they did not withdraw from Katanga. This prompted the Security Council to call for their immediate withdrawal from the province (Resolution 146, 9 August 1960). This was duly done within six weeks. ONUC was left to support the Congolese government restore law and order in the country. The problem was that the issue of Katanga's secession remained unresolved and approximately 510 Belgian officers and foreign mercenaries remained within Katanga to support Tshombé (UN 1990: 242).

In retrospect, it is clear that the UN actively took sides within Congolese politics in two senses. Covertly, the Secretary-General and the United States employed strategies designed to weaken Lumumba's position, especially after August 1960 when he had requested and received military assistance from the Soviet Union to suppress the regional rebellions in Katanga and South Kasai (Gibbs 2000). Lumumba was subsequently abducted and later murdered by opposition politicians in January 1961. The UN also authorized ONUC to use force, ostensibly to prevent civil

war in the Congo (Resolution 161, 21 February 1961). UN peacekeepers used force shortly afterwards against Tshombé's gendarmes and various mercenary and 'foreign' (mainly Belgian) elements in Katanga (although ONUC troops were also killed by rogue and undisciplined factions of the Congolese army in several incidents during 1961). The use of force to remove all mercenaries from Katanga was reiterated in November 1961 (Resolution 169). ONUC was eventually terminated in stages after February 1963 when Katanga was reintegrated into the national territory of the Congo. The last ONUC troops were withdrawn by 30 June 1964, although the country continued to receive civilian aid.

ONUC's use of force had important repercussions for UN peacekeeping more generally. As Alan James (1990: 298) has suggested, the mission was widely perceived as a tool of US foreign policy (see also Gibbs 2000). It also generated a financial crisis which has plagued UN operations ever since: ONUC's annual cost was \$66million at a time when the UN's overall budget was only \$70million and France and the Soviet Union refused to pay (Nicholas 1974: 65). The operation also encouraged the UN to ensure that henceforth the role of the Secretary-General would be far more circumscribed. Finally, all subsequent UN forces were given six month long mandates in order to allow the Security Council to periodically review ongoing operations. ONUC's role in the Congo thus highlights two important points. First, given the opportunity, the UN was willing and able to engage in intra-state conflicts well before the 1990s (see Morphet 2000). Second, even when dealing with problems exacerbated by Westphalian systems of governance, in this case the retention of state borders imposed during colonialism, the UN refused to countenance political solutions that were not based on the territorial integrity of the state in question.

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