

NOTE

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Report No. 8

Directorate of History

Canadian Forces Headquarters

Canada and Peace-keeping Operations
The Congo, 1960-64

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Canada and Peace-keeping Operations
The Congo, 1960-64

1. This report is based on an examination of the files of the Department of External Affairs and the Department of National Defence, supplemented wherever possible by secondary accounts. The intention throughout has been to place the Congo operation and Canadian participation in it primarily within a Canadian context. The local politics of the Congo, of course, must be considered in their bewildering complexity, but discussion of this aspects of the problem has been kept to the minimum consistent with an understanding of the events of the years 1960-64.

The United Nations and Peace-keeping: Background

2. The relations between the Great Powers were as strained in mid-1960 as they had ever been since 1945. The collapse of the summit conference of May 1960, precipitated by the U-2 incident earlier that month, ended the cautious hopes for an East-West détente that had arisen during the previous year. Under the able direction of its Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjold, the United Nations again prepared itself for possible service as a buffer between the nuclear powers and their conflicting ideologies and aspirations.

3. The world organization had some experience of the mediatory role. From 1948 the U.N. had mounted several peace-keeping operations of varying size and complexity. The first had come in Palestine in 1948, followed by Kashmir in 1949, Korea in 1950, Suez in 1956 and Lebanon in 1958. Of these operations, two stood out. Korea was a "freak"--a conventional war with limited aims, nominally directed by the United Nations but in practice controlled by the United States. Suez was strikingly different. Then the U.N. had intervened --with the consent of both super powers--to block an Israeli-Anglo-French attempt to seize the Suez Canal by force and topple President Nasser of the United Arab Republic. A polyglot force with infantry, light armoured vehicles, technical and service units had been rapidly created and deployed along the Israeli-Egyptian border. The United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) succeeded in its task of maintaining the peace, and it provided Secretary-General Hammarskjold with a striking personal triumph. Most important, UNEF established the precedent that the U.N. could intervene on a large scale in certain circumstances, and it resulted in the development of certain de facto ground rules for peace-keeping operations. These will be referred to subsequently.

4. In addition, for a year or two before the Congo lapsed into anarchy, Hammarskjold had begun to establish a United Nations "presence" in Africa, hoping thereby to insulate the emerging nations of the continent from the pressures and demands of the Cold War. In a

very real sense, the U.N. Secretariat was almost eager¹ to expand its role on the dark continent.

Canadian Policy on Peace-keeping

5. Canada had participated in each of the United Nations' ventures into peace-keeping. There had been scant enthusiasm² for the task at first, but after the Korean War, Canadian policy came to include a commitment to "any undertaking made by Canada under the Charter of the United Nations. . . ." ³ The formation of UNEF in November 1956 put the capstone on this policy. Mr. Pearson's Nobel Peace Prize and the worldwide acclaim which came to the nation for her role in damping down the Middle East crisis seemed to make participation in peace-keeping a badge of nationhood. Or so it must have seemed to the Canadian government.

6. When the election of 1957 brought a Conservative government to power, the Canadian position on peace-keeping was somewhat modified. "The Minister has observed," the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee wrote to the Acting Under-secretary of State for External Affairs in August 1957, "that these commitments are a very heavy drain on this Department and provide little benefit for the Services. He wishes a review of these commitments with a view to reducing them as soon as possible."⁴ However, perhaps because of strong opposition from within⁵ the Department of External Affairs, nothing was done to reduce the Canadian contribution to U.N. forces.

7. The Minister of National Defence had other problems to worry over. The Avro "Arrow" was scrapped, Canada joined NCRAD and committed herself to accepting the nuclear-tipped "Bomarc" missile from the United States. The R.C.A.F. had only obsolete transport aircraft--North Stars and Flying Boxcars--and there was an urgent need to replace the obsolescent CF-100 interceptor. In addition, beginning in 1959, the government committed itself to a scheme for "National Survival", making plans for mobile support columns, changing the role of the Canadian Army (Militia), and establishing a national warning network to report on nuclear explosions and fallout patterns. This last commitment placed a considerable strain on the resources of the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals.⁶

8. In brief, then, the situation in June 1960 was as follows: the relations of the United States and the Soviet Union were close to the breaking point; the U.N. in consequence was preparing itself for possible service as a buffer between the powers and in addition was looking to expanding its activities in black Africa; Canadian defence policy was in a period of flux, equipment was approaching obsolescence, and the manpower of the armed services was stretched by the national survival commitment, particularly with respect to Army signallers.

Congo: Background to Chaos

9. Belgium's administration of the Congo was not notable for its foresightedness. The huge colony--one-

