

In memory of Patrice Lumumba, assassinated on 17 January 1961

After a resounding victory in the first real elections in which the Congolese participated, Patrice Lumumba became Prime Minister of Congo from 24 June 1960 until his overthrow and imprisonment on 14 September of the same year by Colonel Joseph-Désiré Mobutu and his supporters. Mobutu then ruled the country, first in the shadow, then directly from 1965 until his overthrow in 1997.

On 17 January 1961, Lumumba, this great fighter for Congo's independence, for social justice and for internationalism, was tortured and then executed, along with several of his comrades, by Congolese leaders complicit with Western powers, as well as by Belgian police and soldiers. Lumumba was only 35 years old and could have continued to play a very important role in his country, in Africa and at a global level.

As journalist Colette Braeckman wrote, *“Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese Prime Minister who was illegally removed from office in September, placed under house arrest and then detained in Thysville, had been sent to Katanga on 17 January 1961. Five hours after his arrival on Katangan soil, he was put to death with his two companions Maurice M’Pololo and Robert Okito.”* [1]

Among the Congolese leaders who directly participated in the killing of Lumumba, we find Moïse Tshombé, self-proclaimed president of the Congolese province of Katanga, which seceded on 11 July 1960, less than two weeks after the independence of Congo on 30 June 1960. The Katangan secession proclaimed by Moïse Tshombe was supported by Belgium and the large Belgian mining corporations that controlled that part of Congo (see below) with a view to destabilizing the government led by

Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba.

At least five Belgian policemen and soldiers were present at the assassination. Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, one of the major Congolese leaders responsible for the assassination of Lumumba, did not attend the murder as he was in the capital city in the West of the country.

Belgium's responsibility in the assassination of Lumumba in January 1961 was established by several historians, among whom [Ludo De Witte](#) in [The assassination of Lumumba](#) and was the subject of a [commission of inquiry](#) within the Belgian Parliament in 2001-2002.

In it De Witte sums up in simple words the causes that led to the assassination of Lumumba: *"Lumumba was a victim of imperialism. Actually the powers that wanted to continue imperial rule in Congo, replace a colonial system with a neocolonial system, a system in which Africans would wield political power but controlled by Western powers and their corporations. This is the neocolonialism Lumumba wanted to fight and this is why he was assassinated."*

We should remember the speech delivered by the the Prime Minister of the Republic of Congo, Patrice Lumumba, in reply to what Baudouin, King of the Belgians had said, namely, *"Congo's independence is the culmination of the Belgian 'civilising mission' devised by the genius of Leopold II, which he launched with tenacious courage and which was continued with perseverance by Belgium."* During the proclamation of Congo's independence on June 30, 1960, the Prime Minister of Congo, Patrice Emery Lumumba, gave a memorable speech (Click on the image to listen to the speech).

In his speech Lumumba insisted that justice be done for the Congolese people. Here is an English translation of it.

Speech delivered in Parliament after those by King Baudouin and President Joseph Kasavubu, on the day of the proclamation

of the independence of the Republic of Congo.

"Men and women of the Congo,

Victorious independence fighters,

I salute you in the name of the Congolese Government.

I ask all of you, my friends, who tirelessly fought in our ranks, to mark this June 30, 1960, as an illustrious date that will be ever engraved in your hearts, a date whose meaning you will proudly explain to your children, so that they in turn might relate to their grandchildren and great-grandchildren the glorious history of our struggle for freedom.

Although this independence of the Congo is being proclaimed today by agreement with Belgium, an amicable country, with which we are on equal terms, no Congolese will ever forget that independence was won in struggle, a persevering and inspired struggle carried on from day to day, a struggle, in which we were undaunted by privation or suffering and stunted neither strength nor blood.

It was filled with tears, fire and blood. We are deeply proud of our struggle, because it was just and noble and indispensable in putting an end to the humiliating bondage forced upon us.

That was our lot for the eighty years of colonial rule and our wounds are too fresh and much too painful to be forgotten.

We have experienced forced labour in exchange for pay that did not allow us to satisfy our hunger, to clothe ourselves, to have decent lodgings or to bring up our children as dearly loved ones.

Morning, noon and night we were subjected to jeers, insults and blows because we were 'Negroes'. Who will ever forget

that the black was addressed as 'tu' not because he was a friend, but because the polite 'vous' was reserved for the white man?

We have seen our lands seized in the name of ostensibly just laws, which gave recognition only to the right of might.

We have not forgotten that the law was never the same for the white and the black, that it was lenient to the ones, and cruel and inhuman to the others.

We have experienced atrocious sufferings, being persecuted for political convictions and religious beliefs, and exiled from our native land: our lot was worse than death itself.

We have not forgotten that in the cities the mansions were for the whites and the tumbledown huts for the blacks; that a black was not admitted to the cinemas, restaurants and shops set aside for 'Europeans' that blacks travelled in the barge's holds, under the feet of the whites in their luxury cabins.

Who will ever forget the shootings which killed so many of our brothers, or the cells into which were mercilessly thrown those who no longer wished to submit to the regime of injustice, oppression and exploitation used by the colonialists as a tool of their domination?

All that, my brothers, brought us untold suffering.

But we, who were elected by the votes of your representatives, representatives of the people, to guide our native land, we, who have suffered in body and soul from colonial oppression, we tell you that henceforth all that is finished with.

The Republic of Congo has been proclaimed and our beloved country's future is now in the hands of its own people.

Brothers, let us commence together a new struggle, a sublime

struggle that will lead our country to peace, prosperity and greatness.

Together we shall establish social justice and ensure for everyone a fair remuneration for their labour.

We shall show the world what the black man can do when working in liberty, and we shall make the Congo the pride of Africa.

We shall see to it that the lands of our native country truly benefit its children.

We shall revise all the old laws and make them into new ones that will be just and noble.

We shall stop the persecution of free thought. We shall see to it that all citizens enjoy to the fullest extent the basic freedoms provided for by the Declaration of Human Rights.

We shall eradicate all discrimination, whatever its origin, and we shall ensure for everyone a station in life befitting their human dignity and worthy of their labour and their loyalty to the country.

We shall institute in the country a peace resting not on guns and bayonets but on concord and [goodwill](#).

And in all this, my dear compatriots, we can rely not only on our own enormous forces and immense wealth, but also on the assistance of the numerous foreign states, whose co-operation we shall accept when it is not aimed at imposing upon us an alien policy, but is given in a spirit of friendship.

Even Belgium, which has finally learned the lesson of history and need no longer try to oppose our independence, is prepared to give us its aid and friendship; to that end an agreement has just been signed between our two equal and independent countries. I am sure that this co-operation will benefit both countries. For our part, we shall, while

remaining vigilant, try to observe the engagements we have freely made.

Thus, both in the internal and the external spheres, the new Congo, our beloved Republic to be created by my government, will be rich, free and prosperous. But to attain our goal without delay, I ask all of you, legislators and citizens of the Congo, to give us all the help you can.

I ask you all to forget your tribal quarrels: they weaken us and may cause us to be despised abroad.

I ask you all not to shrink from any sacrifice that might ensure the success of our grand undertaking.

Finally, I ask you unconditionally to respect the life and property of fellow-citizens and foreigners who have settled in our country. If the conduct of these foreigners leaves much to be desired, our Justice will promptly expel them from the territory of the Republic; if, on the contrary, their conduct is good, they must be left in peace, for they, too, are working for our country's prosperity.

The Congo's independence is a decisive step towards the liberation of the whole African continent.

Our government, a government of national and popular unity, will serve its country.

I call on all Congolese citizens, men, women and children, to set themselves resolutely to the task of creating a national economy and ensuring our economic independence.

Eternal glory to the fighters for national liberation!

Long live independence and African unity!

Long live the independent and sovereign Congo!"

Lumumba, a fighter for internationalism

Before becoming Prime Minister, Lumumba had woven steadfast connections with a number of anti-imperialist, panafricanist and internationalist movements and people. In December 1958, he attended the All African Peoples' Conference in Accra where he met among others the Caribbean-Algerian psychiatrist and freedom fighter [Frantz Fanon](#), the Ghanaian president [Kwame Nkrumah](#) and the Cameroonian anti-colonialist leader Félix-Roland Moumié. [2] He made a speech in which he said, "*The fundamental aim of our movement is to free the Congolese people from the colonialist regime and earn them their independence. We base our action on the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man – rights guaranteed to each and every citizen of humanity by the United Nations Charter – and we are of the opinion that the Congo, as a human society, has the right to join the ranks of free peoples.*" He concluded with the following words, "*This is why we passionately cry out with all the delegates: Down with colonialism and imperialism! Down with racism and tribalism! And long live the Congolese nation, long live independent Africa!*"

It is important to point out that during the year 1959, the repression organised by colonialist Belgium resulted in the deaths of dozens if not hundreds of people.

At the end of the All African Peoples' Conference, Lumumba was appointed a permanent member of the co-ordinating committee, as Saïd Bouamama recalls in his *Figures de la révolution africaine*. [3] Lumumba was also in close contact with Belgian anticolonialist and anticapitalist militants such as [Jean Van Lierde](#), who worked in support of the revolution in Algeria and who maintained close ties [4] with the weekly *La Gauche* and its main driving force, Ernest Mandel.

A few weeks after the conference in Accra, Lumumba and his movement held a meeting to report on the proceedings of the anticolonialist summit in Léopoldville, then capital of the

Belgian Congo. He called for the independence of Congo before an audience of 10,000. He described the goal of the *Mouvement National Congolais* as “to liquidate the colonialist regime and the exploitation of men by men.” [5]

According to *Le Monde Diplomatique* of February 1959, a riot broke out in Léopoldville following the conference, beginning 4 January 1959. This is what the French monthly had to say: “The origin of the riot is directly related to the All-Africa Peoples’ Conference in Accra. It was as the leaders of the *Mouvement National Congolais* – headed by the president of the movement, Mr. Lumumba – were preparing to hold a public meeting on the subject that the unrest first broke out. With the authorisation of the Governor General of the Belgian Congo, Mr. Cornelis, a delegation of Congolese nationalists, led by Mr. Lumumba, had travelled to Ghana in December. It was as the delegation was preparing to report on its visit and its work, on 4 January, that the police gave the conference attendees and those who had come to hear them the order to disperse.” [6]

It is important to point out that during the year 1959, the repression organised by colonialist Belgium resulted in the deaths of dozens if not hundreds of people. One example of the extent of the repression: in October 1959, during the national congress of the *Mouvement National Congolais* (MNC) in Stanleyville, police fired into the crowd, killing 30 and wounding hundreds. Lumumba was arrested a few days later, tried in January 1960 and sentenced to six months in prison on 21 January 1960.

But protest was so intense that out of fear, the regime in Brussels decided to defuse the situation by calling local elections in which the Congolese were allowed to participate. Lumumba was freed on 26 January, only a few days after his sentencing. Finally, following the local elections, a general election was held in May 1960, the first in the history of the Belgian Congo. The *Mouvement National Congolais* (MNC) won the

election and as a result Lumumba was appointed prime minister.

The sequence of events that led to the coup against Lumumba and to his assassination

Following Lumumba's speech of 30 June, the Belgian government, the monarchy and the heads of the major Belgian companies present in Congo decided to destabilize Lumumba and provoke the secession of Katanga, the province where most of the raw materials (copper, cobalt, radium) were extracted. Congolese accomplices immediately stepped up in the form of Moïse Tshombé, proclaimed president of Katanga on 11 July 1960, President Joseph Kasa-Vubu, who revoked Lumumba in September 1960 despite having no constitutional authority to do so, and Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, who led a coup d'état a few days later and had Lumumba arrested, despite the fact that his ministers had expressed their confidence in him and that his party was the leading party in the parliament. Mobutu, who had had a military career during the colonial period and was a former journalist for the pro-colonial press in Congo, had managed to be appointed to the rank of colonel in the new army and quickly turned against Congo's elected government.

The operation leading to Lumumba's execution was directly accompanied and directed by Belgians on orders from Brussels. On 17 January 1961, Lumumba, Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito were taken in an airplane piloted by a Belgian crew to Élisabethville, the capital of Katanga, and handed over to the local authorities. They were then tortured by Katangese leaders, including Moïse Tshombé, and by Belgians. They were shot that evening by soldiers under the command of a Belgian officer.

Belgium, as a member of [NATO](#), had a heavily-equipped military zone in Western Germany extending from the Belgian border to that of the Soviet-aligned countries. The Belgian general

staff had at its disposal a considerable military arsenal, at least partly originating in the USA, and NATO allowed them to deploy aircraft, troop transports and even warships which bombarded Congolese positions in the Congo estuary. The US government and CIA were also at the controls "alongside" the Belgians, with whom they had decided to assassinate Lumumba. [7]. France was also on board. In a telegram dated 26 August 1960, the director of the CIA, Allen Dulles, told his agents in Léopoldville, concerning Lumumba: "*Consequently, we concluded that his removal must be an urgent and prime objective and that under existing conditions this should be a high priority of our covert action.*" [8]

We should mention that on 12 August 1960, Belgium had signed an accord with Tshombé, recognising *de facto* the independence of Katanga. The attempts made by Lumumba's government to deal with the secession were fully legitimate, but were fought against by the major Western powers.

Despite his arrest by Mobutu, Lumumba did not capitulate and maintained contact with the ministers who remained faithful to their commitments, and with his comrades. A clandestine government led by Antoine Gizenga was established in Stanleyville. Lumumba managed to escape from his jailers on 27 November 1960 and attempted to join up with the government in Stanleyville, but was arrested a few days later in transit. In January 1961, with Lumumba still highly popular, Mobutu and the Western powers feared that a popular revolt would lead to the leader's liberation and decided to have him executed. The operation leading to Lumumba's execution was directly accompanied and directed by Belgians on orders from Brussels. On 17 January 1961, Lumumba, Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito were taken in an airplane piloted by a Belgian crew to Élisabethville, the capital of Katanga, and handed over to the local authorities. They were then tortured by Katangese leaders, including Moïse Tshombé, and by Belgians. They were shot that evening by soldiers under the command of a Belgian

officer.

According to the testimony of Belgian Gerard Soete, then police commissioner in charge of setting up a "*Katangese national police force*", the three bodies were transported 220 kilometres from the place of execution, and were buried in the earth behind a termite mound, in the middle of a wooded savannah.

The AFP, which had collected this testimony, reports that three days later the bodies were moved again to delete any possibility of tracking them. Soete said he was accompanied by "*another white man*" and a few Congolese when they cut up the corpses with saws and dissolved them in acid. [9]Mobutu and Ronald Reagan

Belgium's support for the Mobutu dictatorship

The Belgian army intervened twice in the Congo to help Mobutu and his dictatorial regime to crush the resistance of Lumumbist organizations, first in November 1964 with the operation Red Dragon and Black Dragon, respectively at Stanleyville and at Paulis. On this occasion, the operation was jointly led by the Belgian army, Mobutu's army, the General Staff of the US army and mercenaries, among whom some anti-Castro Cubans.

In a speech delivered at the UN General Assembly in November 1964, Ernesto Che Guevara condemned this intervention, as he also did in a speech delivered in Santiago de Cuba, "*today, the most poignant and pervasive memory that stays with us is that of the Congo and of Lumumba. Today, in that country that is both so distant and so near to our hearts, historical events have occurred which we have to know about, as we have to learn from what has been experienced. The other day, Belgian parachutists assaulted the city of Stanleyville.*" (excerpt from Che Guevara's speech in Santiago de Cuba on 30

November 1964, on the occasion of the 8th anniversary of the town's uprising led by Frank País (translation CADTM, from the [French version](#)).

The second intervention of the Belgian army occurred in Kolwezi in the heart of the mining area of Shaba (Katanga) in May 1978 in collaboration with the French army and Mobutu's army.

Litigation still in progress in Belgium concerning the assassination of Lumumba

The Belgian courts have not yet handed down a judgment concerning the murder of Lumumba. If the case has remained open, it is only due to the ongoing actions of all those who are determined to see justice done. The Lumumba family continues its actions toward revealing the truth. A Belgian examining magistrate is still in charge of the case since it has been classified as a war crime to which no statute of limitations applies. And as the family's attorney, Christophe Marchand, pointed out to Belgian television on 23 June 2011 *"the main instigators are all dead today (...) but former advisors and attachés of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are still alive."*Lumumba in Brussels (1960) (CC – Wikimedia)

Lumumba has become an emblematic figure

The figure of Patrice Lumumba has traversed history and still serves today as an example for all who champion the emancipation of peoples. Lumumba never surrendered.

Such was his popularity under the regime of the dictator Mobutu that the latter decreed Patrice Lumumba a national hero in 1966. Not satisfied with having overthrown him in September 1960 and with being one of the main organizers of his murder, Mobutu attempted to steal a part of his aura. The day of his execution, 17 January, is a bank holiday in Congo-Kinshasa.

In Brussels, after years of actions by anticolonialist militants, the municipal council voted on 23 April 2018 to create a square, the Place Patrice-Lumumba, which was officially inaugurated on 30 June of the same year, the date of the 58th anniversary of the independence of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

But all of that amounts to very little.

Beyond the need to disseminate the truth about Lumumba's struggle and to demand that justice be done him, his struggle and that of all the women and men of Congo who fought against all forms of spoliation, oppression and exploitation must be continued.

That is why the CADTM feels that the Belgian authorities must:

- Recognise publicly and name all of the abuses and crimes committed against the people of Congo by Léopold II and the Belgian monarchy, and make official excuses;
- Deepen and extend the task of remembrance by involving the appropriate personnel both in public education and popular educational activities and including in institutional areas;
- Restore all Congolese cultural property to the Congolese;
- Actively support the review of all colonialist symbols in public spaces in Belgium;
- Conduct a historical audit of debt in order to make unconditional financial reparation and retrocession for the amounts extracted during the colonisation of Congo;
- Take action within the multilateral institutions ([*World Bank*](#), [*IMF*](#), [*Paris Club*](#), etc.) so that their members totally and unconditionally cancel repayment of all odious debt on the Democratic Republic of Congo;
- Publicly support all moratoria on repayment of debt enacted by the government of Congo in order to improve the public health system and face the epidemic of

CoViD-19 and other diseases which cause deaths that would be entirely preventable if expenditures on public health are increased.

The CADTM supports the various collectives calling for actions in Belgium in the wake of the *Black Lives Matter* protests and all those who are taking action in the area of awareness of colonialism.

The CADTM supports the Congolese people in facing the health, economic and social consequences of the CoViD-19 crisis. In spite of the diktats of creditors and the serious failures of successive Congo governments, which have resulted in severe repression and flagrant denial of fundamental human rights, social movements in Congo have resisted. The CADTM supports these and other struggles for social justice.