

## When Tshombe Led the UN Troops

SITU MULICK

*We publish this article by Situ Mullick, who left us on September 5, 1989, for good, after a brave and long battle with cancer. After retirement from active service as the Chief Public Relation Officer in the Ministry of Defence, Situ became an active member of the Sponsoring Committee of the Indian Mountaineering Federation. He also edited the 'Air Force Association News' - a bi-annual until his last days. Though pressed for time, he devoted a great deal of effort in furthering the interests of the USI and wrote a number of articles about the USI and its Library in various journals. He made a major contribution to the Centenary Exhibition of the USI in 1971 by producing and arranging a large number of excellent photographs. All those who knew him will deeply miss him.*

*The following article, shows the Indian Army under UN Command, in a peace-keeping role in the Congo, a forerunner of the IPKF in Sri Lanka.*

Operation Grand Slam had made an incredible headway under Brigadier (later Lt General and Vice Army Chief but, sadly, no longer with us) Reggie Noronha's command. His trained and disciplined, professional Indian soldiers serving the United Nations in the Congo, had neutralised all resistance stiffly put up by well-equipped white mercenaries-led Katangese gendarmerie who were, at last, on the run. Moise Tshombe, a past master in guile and perfidy, had sued for peace for the n'th time. But no longer anyone chose to take him seriously. But at the UN headquarters in Elisabethville, E'ville for short, he even "pledged" to lead a 'peace-drive' to Mokambo down the Sakania road in token of permitting complete freedom of movement to the UN forces.'

On the night of January 9, 1963, the UN Katanga force commander, Maj.-General Dewan Prem Chand, tipped me off in confidence that the UN troops were now poised to clear all road-blocks and smoothen the way right upto the northern Rhodesian border early next morning. "You better be near the Union Miniere at the break of dawn tomorrow", he advised, adding: "I leave it to your discretion to sound your press friends as well".

The international mediamen, whom we had nicknamed the 'Katanga Press', were, instinctively, anti-UN and rabidly so where the Indian and the Ethiopian troops were concerned. But our Indian PR team, which I had the honour of leading, had somehow managed to 'convert' them gradually and the measure of their past hostility had, seemingly shrunk. By now they

were, in fact, a friendly crowd and no longer out and out pro-Tshombe on account principally of his well-gearred, European managed PR set-up.

At least two meetings at our office for an 'off-the-record-'Briefing' had come to be a daily routine, and the Press relished it just as much as we did in sharing 'newsy' gossip with them relating to 'both the camps'. In the evening session, excited by the commander's tip but maintaining PR blank facade, I casually mentioned if they were mobile and interested in a long drive. "If you are and if you want to take a chance be near the 'ash-hill' before the sun rises", I suggested. And dictated by a hunch, added: "Better come prepared for an outing the whole day". And sure enough, they were all there before the first light, in their borrowed, hired and, even, stolen cars, big and small and of every vintage. They saw my UN jeep and were all restive to meet me and know more about what was in the offing. My stupid smile betrayed all that needs to be divulged by a cautious PRO in a somewhat oblique and mute language which, luckily, pressmen readily and gratefully understand.

Thus, we started off the day famously, talking of men, matters and memories and munching sandwiches and gulping them down with rum diluted with coffee.

The Zero hour given me by General Prem Chand was fast approaching but there was no sign yet of any troops. The uncanny eyes of the newsmen immediately spotted my uneasiness and 'forced' me to talk. It was good half hour past the crucial time when the Ethiopian troops were to pass that way with the supporting Indian artillery and armoured units. I knew of an Ethiopian outpost some five km from the Union Miniere. My driver, Naik Harinarain, and I left the, by now, somewhat restive company of the news hounds and sped off, to gather some more reliable intelligence than the Katanga Force commander had been pleased to pass on to me the previous night. The Ethiopian vanguard troops had already struck their camp and were as surprised as I was baffled by having had no sign yet of their main force which had been due good 45 minutes earlier. The advance troops themselves should, by now, have moved further forward a few kilometres towards the Rhodesian border, probably already encountering resistance and engaged in a bloody battle...

It didn't take me long to decide that I should best be with my own Press friends, however devastatingly curious they might be. And sure enough: As I returned to the Union Miniere site the police sirens were hooting away madly, and a big black limousine seemed to be the all important centre of universal interest very close to the rendezvous point. The Pressmen's cars were all a flutter, turning and reversing and getting into positions in, by now, an extended motorcade as near the black big car as possible.

It was Tshombe in this big black car.

How come. He was supposed to be under house arrest ever since the 'Grand Slam' had started. The mystery was solved after my highly competent and intelligent driver, Harnarain, and I, the two solitary UN personnel in a solitary UN jeep and in our conspicuous UN blue berets, managed to get into the motorcade, and with a hooting police scout-car ahead, set out on an unknown journey...

Hereafter, it is best to quote a Reuter's report carried on front page by almost all Indian national dailies, on Friday, January 11, 1963. It was dated Mokambo (Katanga) January 10, and it said: Mr. Tshombe made a fantastic peace drive to the northern Rhodesian border as an armoured UN rolled down the road some miles behind, determined to open the key supply route from Elisabethville to Rhodesia. Driving down the dusty 174-mile road from Elisabethville to this border post, he told the cheering crowd of villagers not to attack the UN forces. He said he wished to save his people from a "massacre".... Before the peace drive started at dawn, the UN withdrew an order to place Mr. Tshombe under house arrest after he offered to permit UN forces freedom of movement down the Sakania road and agreed to go ahead of Indian and Ethiopian UN troops down the road to prevent any clashes... Reuter added: "The only UN personnel to travel with Mr. Tshombe were Wing Commander Situ Mullick, Press officer of the Indian Brigade in Elisabethville, and Cpl. Harnarain of the Rajputana Rifles. The two, both in full uniform, travelled in a white UN jeep. They drove with great courage through African villages extremely hostile to the UN, and were watched incredulously by armed Katangese gendarmerie. There were no incidents. The Indian and Ethiopian column was led by General Premchand, the Indian commander of the Katanga operations, and Col. Worku, an Ethiopian...."

John Ridley of the Daily Telegraph, who too was with us during the Mokambo March (it sounds better than 'drive') quite aptly observed that Tshombe had always been the man 'who could charm birds out of trees'. To this observation I would like to add that Tshombe was the man who drew the Press as would the rare flower the most festidious of nectar-sucking bees. He had, quite unexpectedly, but not surprisingly, provided a lead story that day to every journalist and broadcaster, to every TV and newsreel cameraman that followed him to Mokambo. Even the Indian papers (which provided the solitary exception by not positioning their foreign correspondents in the Congo where the Indian troops were playing the premier role) front-paged the day's story. Of course, I had quite the most severe of reprimands from my UN bosses the next day "for having undertaken an unauthorised temporary duty without having first obtained a movement order". The stiff letter

that came some days later from home with a paper-cutting was a matter purely of a serious domestic quarrel....

There was no champagne for the Press at Mokambo. But minister Munongo (who is believed to have killed Lumumba) had, thoughtfully provided Simba beer for the thirsty Pressmen, but never so much as once did anyone ask if someone wanted to have a bite....

I did meet Tshombe again once or twice. But for the purpose of this story, I might recall my meeting him at Kolwezi where he was giving an exclusive interview to a few chosen foreign correspondents a day following the triumphal entry of the UN Indian troops into Kolwezi - the last stronghold of the Katangese army and one of the major industrial centres of Katanga. After he had talked to other correspondent, in French of course, I thought of having a word with him myself. And I had a handy excuse for starting the conversation by inquiring after his 'bandaged eye'. Through an interpreter I expressed my concern and expressed the hope that the trouble was not serious. Mr. Tshombe promptly replied: "Of course I have met you before, not long ago at Elisabethville during my last visit and indeed soon thereafter at Mokambo, though I didn't meet your driver there". Then, after a pause, he added, "I know you have seen the world and, therefore you must know what these doctors are like. For no earthly reason and in complete defiance of my protests, they have insisted upon my being made to appear as if gravely sick. This bandage which you see blinding my one eye is an unkind handicraft of my unkind doctor".

It was not necessary to have any real clairvoyant powers or be assured that the bandage which Mr. Tshombe donned that morning following his final collapse as head of the secessionist Katanga province, was only to regain universal sympathies, particularly of the genuinely concerned press whom he was meeting that morning perhaps for the last time while still not legally unseated from his presidential gaddi. Accepting good-humouredly his softly hitting witty reply, I remarked: "Sir, the whole trouble starts from pampering the family doctor too often and too much, and by letting him have a free hand in devising ways and means which are not always medically necessary. However, one cannot possibly take a risk with a delicate thing such as an eye and the best course, I suppose, should be to submit to the doc's way". He nodded benignly and accepted my expression of good wishes and speedy recovery with a beguiling smile.

Obviously, Moise Tshombe had, at last, accepted me as a Press-man in spite of my UN uniform.