

Case Study of United Nations Operations in Congo: Impact on India's Future Peacekeeping

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"India's spontaneous and unreserved participation in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations over the years has been a clear demonstration of the country's commitment to the objectives set out in the UN Charter. Not in terms of rhetoric and symbolism, but in real and practical terms, even to the extent of accepting casualties to personnel"

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Abstract

India's contributions to the United Nations peacekeeping operations in the Congo (1960–1964), marked a transformation in India's approach from non-alignment and minimal intervention to a more assertive, strategically nuanced engagement in global peacekeeping. Indian Armed Forces units were deployed amidst tribal conflicts and political turmoil threatening the nascent Congolese state. India's contingent played a decisive role in facilitating the withdrawal of Belgian troops, and neutralising secessionist movements, particularly in Katanga, thus, preserving the country's unity and territorial integrity. By balancing military effectiveness with ethical imperatives in conflict resolution, India's role in the Congo reflects a broader strategic recalibration.

Introduction

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly the Belgian Congo) is a country defined by its vast geography and rich natural resources. Often described as the gift of the Congo River, it occupies 23,43,904 sq kms at the heart of Africa. With a short coastline of 40 kms extending north from the mouth of the Congo

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River, the country remains largely landlocked. Before gaining its independence, the Congo was a vast but sparsely populated territory, home to a highly diverse indigenous population divided into over 200 ethnic groups.¹ Tribal divisions and regional disparities played a significant role in shaping the country's political landscape, contributing to instability post-independence. The most influential groups included the Ba-Kongo, Ba-Luba, and Ba-Mongo, each of whom had distinct regional and political roles. These ethnic divisions and regional rivalries fuelled post-independence instability, directly shaping the challenges that had to be addressed.²

Road to Crisis

The rise of nationalism in post-World War II Africa and Asia initially bypassed the Belgian Congo, which remained under direct colonial rule. This changed in Dec 1955 with Professor Van Bilsen's Thirty-Year Plan for the Political Emancipation of Belgian Africa, which sparked debate among the Congolese elite.³ In response, they demanded an end to discrimination, democratic governance, and eventual independence. By independence on 30 Jun 1960, nationalist movements had fragmented, leaving the Congolese leadership largely inexperienced. The-then Prime Minister (PM) Patrice Lumumba, President Joseph Kasavubu, and Chief of Staff Mobutu Sese Seko had no prior governance experience, nor did Moïse Tshombe, the future leader of secessionist Katanga. As United Nations (UN) Special Representative Dr Ralph J Bunche remarked, "Congo was totally unprepared for independence. Technicians are non-existent on the African or indigenous side".⁴

Post-independence Congo faced severe instability, starting with a Force Publique mutiny on 04 Jul 1960, as soldiers demanded Africanisation, higher wages, and Belgian officers' expulsion. The revolt escalated into widespread anti-Belgian violence, with riots and looting in major cities and the seizure of key infrastructure in Leopoldville. Belgian nationals were targeted, leading to a mass exodus, which created a humanitarian crisis. In response, Belgium deployed 2,500 paratroopers, prompting condemnation from Congolese leaders, who sought UN assistance.⁵ In response, the UN adopted Resolution 143 on 14 Jul 1960, establishing UN Operations in Congo (ONUC) to help restore order. However, its mandate barred interference in internal affairs, limiting its ability to curb secessionist movements in Katanga and South Kasai. The

mutiny, political crisis, and lack of preparation weakened central authority, creating a power vacuum that was exploited by separatist movements and local militias, which, combined with political fragmentation, precipitated widespread violence and instability, caused the situation to spiral out of control.⁶

Peacekeeping Operations

In the immediate aftermath of Congolese independence, escalating internal violence and the disintegration of central authority necessitated a decisive international response. On 14 Jul 1960, the UN Security Council mandated Belgium's withdrawal from the Congo and authorised the mobilisation of military aid to support the nascent national forces.⁷ Within 24 hours, the first peacekeeping units principally from Ghana and Tunisia had arrived, signalling the commencement of a landmark multinational operation. Dr Bunche was appointed as the Special UN Representative in the Congo, tasked with overseeing the mission's rapid deployment and operational integrity.⁸ On 17 Jul 1960, following an ultimatum from the Congolese government to expel Belgian troops within 72 hours, the UN escalated its intervention. By 18 Jul 1960, 3,500 UN troops had been confirmed in the country. The situation intensified further on 26 Jul 1960: amid persistent pressures, including PM Lumumba's emphatic declaration at the UN that its forces must enter Katanga to remove foreign elements, the peacekeeping contingent expanded to 8,396 troops drawn from seven member states. This force was supported by 100 personnel from the UN Secretariat and 24 technical experts, ensuring a comprehensive operational capability.⁹

Key contributors to the operation included India, Ghana, Tunisia, and Sweden. India's substantial contingent was instrumental, with its policymakers insisting on a well-defined mandate for ONUC and rejecting any ambiguity in its operational objectives. Ghana and Tunisia provided robust infantry and logistical support, while Sweden contributed specialised technical and engineering expertise, each playing a critical role in the mission. The operation was further underpinned by a strategic principle of self-defence, which permitted UN forces to secure vital communication centres and establish ceasefire lines where necessary.¹⁰ Such measures were essential in enabling the multinational force to act decisively amidst a rapidly deteriorating

security situation. Through these coordinated actions, ONUC not only aimed to stabilise the Congo and safeguard its territorial integrity, but also set a precedent for future UN peacekeeping missions, demonstrating the efficacy of collective international intervention in resolving complex conflicts. In addition to the initial deployment, ONUC's operational framework was marked by the diverse composition of contributing nations, with over 30 countries providing troops, ranging from infantry and mechanised units to logistical and engineering support.¹¹ This diversity in forces presented both a challenge and a strength, as the UN had to manage interoperability among varied military structures. Key engagements included the suppression of secessionist movements in Katanga, particularly in response to the Belgian-backed forces, which required UN troops to engage directly in combat to uphold the territorial integrity of the Congo. To address the complex and volatile political environment, a series of strategically executed military operations were launched. These operations, each addressing specific challenges faced by the newly independent nation, were pivotal in attempting to restore order, neutralise secessionist movements, and maintain the territorial integrity of the Congo.¹² A total of six major operations were carried out, each with distinct objectives and military engagements that shaped the trajectory of the mission¹³:

- **Operation Rumpunch (1960).** Operation Rumpunch, launched on 28 Aug 1960, was a critical military initiative aimed at neutralising the growing influence of foreign mercenaries and external combatants supporting the secessionist cause in Katanga. The mission's central objective was to dismantle the mercenary infrastructure and halt the influx of weapons and supplies into the region, which had been exacerbating the instability. Commanded by General Indarjit Rikhye, the operation involved approximately 10,000 troops drawn from India, Ghana, and Tunisia. These forces were tasked with disrupting the logistical networks, sustaining the rebellion, and targeting mercenary camps, which had become a focal point for secessionist resistance. The operation saw a series of coordinated raids and tactical arrests, with 100 mercenaries either captured or neutralised by mid-Jan 1964. The combination of ground and aerial operations allowed the UN forces to secure strategic areas.

However, despite the success in eliminating many foreign agents, the operation was less effective in curbing local militias and political figures, which continued to fuel the rebellion. As General Rikhye remarked, “We are clearing the path to peace—one step at a time”.¹⁴ While Operation Rumpunch was operationally successful in weakening the mercenary presence and destabilising the secessionist movement, it did not end the rebellion. The groundwork laid by this mission ultimately set the stage for Operation Morthor, which more directly targeted the secessionist leadership and sought to restore full control to the central government in the following months.¹⁵

- **Operation Morthor (1961).** Operation Morthor was initiated on 13 Sep 1961 as a decisive military intervention aimed at neutralising the entrenched secessionist forces in Katanga, which had received backing from Belgian mercenaries and local rebel groups, thereby, undermining the authority of the newly formed Congolese government. Conceived with the vision of restoring central government control and upholding the territorial integrity of the Republic of the Congo, the operation was commanded by General Rikhye. Under his leadership, a multinational force of approximately 20,000 troops was deployed, with significant contributions from India, Ghana, Tunisia, and Morocco. The operation commenced on 13 Sep 1964 with meticulously planned ground assaults on key rebel positions, resulting in the loss of about 13 UN soldiers and 200 secessionist fighters. During the engagement, General Rikhye asserted, “The integrity of the Congo is non-negotiable”¹⁶, a declaration that underscored the UN’s commitment to re-establishing order. Ultimately, while the operation succeeded in dismantling several critical secessionist strongholds, sporadic resistance persisted, necessitating further the UN’s involvement and attracting criticism for the perceived excessive use of force amid ongoing regional instability.¹⁷

- **Operation UNOKAT (1961).** On 05 Dec 1961, Operation UNOKAT was launched as a UN military offensive aimed at breaking the secessionist stronghold of Katanga, led by Moïse Tshombe. Following the failure of Operation Morthor (Sep 1961) and the death of UN Secretary-General Dag

Hammar skjöld, tensions between ONUC and Katangese forces escalated. The operation was commanded by Brigadier-General Sean MacEoin of Ireland, who led a multinational UN force of approximately 5,000 troops drawn from India, Sweden, Ireland, Ethiopia, and Ghana. The primary objective was to disarm Tshombe's forces, regain control of key infrastructure in Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi), and reassert Congolese sovereignty over the breakaway province. The assault began with coordinated air and ground offensives targeting Katangese Gendarmerie positions, followed by intense urban combat as UN troops advanced through the city. The battle resulted in heavy casualties, with at least 11 UN soldiers and over 100 Katangese fighters killed. Despite achieving its immediate military goals, Operation UNOKAT did not fully dismantle the secessionist movement, which persisted until the larger Operation Grand Slam (1963). Internationally, the operation was met with mixed reactions—the Congolese government welcomed it as a step toward national unity, while Western powers, particularly Belgium and the United States (US), criticised the UN for excessive force, fearing a power vacuum that could be exploited by communist factions.¹⁸

● **Operation Grand Slam (1962).** Operation Grand Slam was launched on 28 Dec 1962 as part of the ONUC's last effort to dismantle the secessionist movement in Katanga, a province that had long defied the authority of the central Congolese government. The mission's primary objective was clear: to decisively defeat the remaining secessionist forces and restore full government control over Katanga. Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col) RS Banerjee of the Indian Army, a force of 5,000 troops from India, Morocco, and Belgium was mobilised for the operation. The mission was meticulously planned to target the key fortified positions held by rebel leaders, with the aim of breaking the backbone of the secessionist movement. The operation unfolded with a series of coordinated air and ground attacks aimed at key rebel strongholds. Within a matter of days, the UN forces secured vital positions, forcing the secessionist forces to disband, and leading to a marked reduction in their military capabilities. As Lt Col Banerjee remarked, "This operation will be a turning point for the Congo"¹⁹, highlighting the

mission's critical significance in shifting the balance of power. By the end of the operation, UN forces had successfully neutralised the core of the secessionist resistance, and Katanga was largely brought back under central government control. The success of Operation Grand Slam was celebrated as a decisive turning point, signalling the effective end of Katanga's secession, although the broader challenges of stabilising the region continued to persist.²⁰

● **Operation Dragon Rouge (1964).** On 24 Nov 1964, Operation Dragon Rouge was launched as a high-risk military intervention to rescue over 2,000 hostages held by Simba rebels in Stanleyville (now Kisangani), Congo. The hostages, primarily European and American nationals, had been seized amid the Congo Crisis, escalating tensions in the region. The operation was led by Colonel Charles Laurent of the Belgian paratroopers, with logistical and intelligence support from the US. The mission was planned in coordination with the Congolese government of Tshombe, who sought to reclaim control over rebel-held areas. The assault force comprised approximately 550 elite Belgian paratroopers, flown in by American C-130 transport aircraft from Belgium's base in Ascension Island. The operation commenced with a swift airborne assault, targeting key rebel positions in Stanleyville. Belgian forces landed at Simi-Simi Airport and rapidly advanced toward the city's central district, where the hostages were being held at the Victoria Hotel. As the paratroopers moved in, the Simba rebels responded with chaotic but brutal resistance, executing dozens of hostages before they could be rescued. Despite this tragedy, the Belgian troops managed to secure the area and evacuate the surviving hostages within two days, completing the mission by 26 Nov 1964. While the operation was tactically successful, it was highly controversial.²¹ Dozens of Congolese civilians were killed in the crossfire, and the intervention intensified Cold War rivalries, with the Soviet Union and African nationalist leaders condemning the western military presence. Nevertheless, Operation Dragon Rouge remains one of the most daring hostage rescue missions of the 20th Century, showcasing the complexities of foreign military interventions in post-colonial Africa.²²

The series of military operations conducted under ONUC demonstrated the complexities and challenges of UN peacekeeping in a politically unstable environment. While each mission had clear objectives, their execution highlighted the evolving nature of peace enforcement in a volatile conflict zone. The engagements in Katanga and the eastern Congo not only shaped the trajectory of the mission, but also set a precedent for future UN interventions. Despite achieving significant tactical successes, such as restoring government control over rebellious regions and dismantling insurgent networks, the long-term stability of the Congo remained uncertain. The operations underscored the limitations of military action alone in resolving deeply rooted political divisions, reinforcing the notion that peacekeeping efforts must be supported by sustained diplomatic and governance initiatives to ensure security and stability.²³

India's Military Contribution

India's contribution to the ONUC was driven by the commitment 'To serve the cause of the people of the Congo, help them in their difficulties, and serve the cause of peace'. India initially sent approximately 800 personnel to the Congo, primarily for non-combat duties. In its communications with the UN Secretary-General, the Government of India expressed its disapproval of how ONUC was functioning in the Congo and declared that it had no desire to send Indian combatant forces unless UN policy was changed and rendered more effective. As the former Indian PM Jawaharlal Nehru stated, "We do not want to send our people to be insulted and without being able to do anything".²⁴

Nevertheless, the adoption of the Feb 1961 Resolution in the Security Council clarified UN policy regarding the Congo, largely aligning it with India's perspective. This resolution was created in collaboration with Indian representatives, and India sensed a related obligation to assist the UN in establishing law and order in the Congo. In his statement, the PM of India at the time clarified to the Lok Sabha, "First of all, the intrusion of any great power forces would not have been welcomed anywhere. Secondly, countries which are normally associated in military alliances are not welcomed, because they give rise to counterforces coming into, so that by a process of exclusion, or call it what you will, it fell to us to take a step. We were invited to do so, and if we did not take it up, there was grave danger of the whole of the UN

structure in the Congo not functioning, or even collapsing, at a time when, oddly enough, the UN was being attacked from both directions—that is, the so-called two major military blocs, both of them, were attacking the UN for entirely different reasons, of course. And we decided, therefore, to do something which we had done previously in this way”.²⁵

The Indian troops played an exceptional role in the service of the UN Peacekeeping Operations in Congo, and this was recognised by all. As Lt Gen S McKeown complimented, “The Indian Independent Brigade Group can be likened to a very small blanket thrown over a very large man. When the top of the body gets cold the blanket is drawn up, and when the feet get cold the blanket is moved down again. Not only this, but the blanket had to be cut into small pieces to cover at the same time various parts of the body”.²⁶ Three notable features singled out the Indian contingent in the Congo. Numerically, it was the largest single component, since Apr 1961, of the UN force drawn from over a dozen ‘Un-committed’ nations. Secondly, the Indian troops were all professional, highly trained soldiers, and not volunteers ‘Enrolled’ on a short-term basis. Thirdly, all three Indian Infantry Battalions and the bulk of other combat elements were concentrated in secessionist Katanga to bear the brunt of the fighting. Furthermore, the presence of an Indian Air Force detachment of Canberra interdiction jet aircraft, in service since Oct 1961, exerted a marked influence on the very conduct of the ONUC—acknowledged as the biggest and most hazardous ever undertaken by the international organisation. It must go to the credit of India that even after the sudden and massive Chinese invasion of India’s northern frontiers in Oct 1962, India did not withdraw her troops from the soil of the Congo until the UN objectives were fully achieved.²⁷ The Indian Independent Brigade Group, which was the keystone of the UN operation in the Congo, comprised some of the finest soldiers of the Indian Army, drawn from three renowned regiments—the Jat, the Dogra, and the Gurkha. These regiments, with their glorious traditions, have been famous for gallantry and heroism dating back to the earliest days of the Indian Army. An integral part of this brigade was several other supporting units which shared equal credit with the infantry battalions in the success of the Katanga operations. A detachment of Daimler armoured cars and armoured personnel carriers of the 63 Cavalry, whose Commanding Officer Major Moti Singh earned the epithet

'Indomitable Major' by being always at the forefront in every action, struck terror in the heart of the enemy. The Indian troops served in every part of the Congo ungrudgingly and with full loyalty to the UN and its ideals, they consistently advanced to the aid of fellow UN troops whenever they were in peril. Despite overwhelming attacks, strafing, and bombing, the Indian troops displayed exemplary courage, never wavering from the soldier's code of conduct. From the standpoint of international cooperation, the Congo operation will go down as one of the most important chapters in the history of the UN peacekeeping. The achievement of the UN and its remarkable international force in restoring peace and freedom to the people of the Congo will ever remain a thing of pride to the rest of mankind.²⁸

Legacy and Future Implications: India's Evolving Role in United Nations Peacekeeping

India's participation in UN peacekeeping has been profoundly shaped by its rich cultural heritage and ethical traditions, which emphasise compassion, human dignity, and respect for personal rights. The Indian contingent has consistently demonstrated a commitment to gender inclusivity, drawing on a long-standing tradition of recognising and empowering women in society. This culturally rooted approach is evident not only in the professional calibre of the soldiers—sourced from diverse regiments renowned for their gallantry—but also in the way Indian peacekeepers engage with local populations. Their conduct in conflict zones is characterised by a deep sensitivity to the cultural and social dynamics of the communities they serve. By forging personal, empathetic relationships with those affected by conflict, Indian forces have embodied a model of peacekeeping that goes beyond mere military intervention, ensuring that humanitarian concerns and the rights of individuals are interwoven with operational objectives.²⁹ The legacy of India's contributions in the Congo has set a benchmark for future peacekeeping endeavours, highlighting the transformative potential of an approach that is both strategically robust and intrinsically humane. Indian peacekeepers have not only met the exigencies of complex military operations but have also pioneered a style of engagement that is rooted in cultural sensitivity and ethical responsibility. This dual focus on operational efficiency and the upholding of personal rights, including gender inclusivity, has ensured that the Indian contingent remains a

stabilising force in some of the world's most volatile regions. By integrating traditional Indian values into the fabric of multinational operations, India has provided the UN with a model for conflict resolution that balances hard power with compassionate outreach. In doing so, the Indian experience continues to influence contemporary peacekeeping policies, encouraging a more inclusive and culturally attuned framework that can adapt to the multifaceted challenges of modern conflicts.³⁰

Conclusion

Looking ahead, the legacy of India's performance in the Congo has become a catalyst for the nation's own military evolution. The lessons learned during this crisis have led to a strategic recalibration, emphasising technological integration, rapid interoperability with multinational forces, and a balanced approach that combines hard power with humanitarian outreach. This evolving doctrine is not merely a reflection of past success but a dynamic framework that positions India as a pivotal contributor in shaping the future of international peacekeeping. As new challenges emerge in an increasingly complex global security environment, the experience garnered from the Congo continues to serve as a model for robust, ethically grounded intervention, reinforcing India's reputation as a responsible, forward-thinking partner in the pursuit of global stability.³¹

Endnotes

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