Mystery of the murdered UN chief refuses to die

US intelligence agencies have files that show how Dag Hammarskjöld died in 1961. It's time they were published

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In the early hours of a September morning in 1961, a plane radioed to the control tower of a small airfield in what is now northern Zambia, requesting permission to land. The Transair Sweden DC-6 was carrying Dag Hammarskjöld, the UN secretary-general, on a mission to try to broker peace in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo.

Minutes later the plane crashed, bursting into flames after Teachers among a patch of dense forest and slamming into a termite hill. Hammarskjöld was found dead, along with 14 other passengers; a single survivor lingered for a few days before he too expired.

But the mystery of Hammarskjöld's death refuses to die. This week, the UN ordered a fresh inquiry, headed by three independent investigators, to try to establish who, or what, ended the life of the austere, spiritual Swede, widely regarded as the finest leader the UN has ever had.

"He was on the point of getting something done when they killed him," said the former US president Harry Truman. "Notice that I said 'when they killed him.'" "They" have been variously identified ever since. Many had a motive to eliminate Hammarskjöld. He was on his way to meet the leader of the bloody secessionist movement in Katanga, the mineral-rich province trying to break away from the Congo, which had won its independence from Belgium the year before. The secessionists, backed up by foreign mercenaries, were supported by Belgium; Britain and America had significant mining interests in Katanga.

Hammarskjöld regarded the secessionist movement as a neo-colonialist bid to retain control over the region's vast mineral wealth, and supported the elected authorities of the Congo, which were backed, in turn, by the Soviets. Here was a classic Cold War confrontation, a test of Africa's independence and post-colonial power. As he flew into Ndola airfield in what was then Northern Rhodesia, Hammarskjöld was already on a collision course with the Belgian white settlers.

A Rhodesian inquiry in 1961 ruled, on the basis of wishful thinking, that the crash had been due to pilot error. Two subsequent UN inquiries were inconclusive. The conspiracy theorists immediately set to work, citing a failed hijacking, a bomb in the hold, faulty maps, a tired pilot. Hammarskjöld was said to have survived the crash, only to be murdered on the ground, an ace of spades placed in his collar, and the bullet wound to his head airbrushed out of the post-mortem photos.

The mystery might have gone the same way as the endlessly debated deaths of JFK and Princess Diana, sprouting ever more complex, the secrecy in blunt defiance of humanity and common sense.

Every piece of new evidence uncovered in recent decades suggests that Hammarskjöld's DC-6 was brought down by a second plane—eyewitnesses who saw lights in the sky before the crash; the evidence of the sole survivor, discounted by earlier inquiries, that he saw "sparks" outside the plane before it dived; a cable sent by the US ambassador to Congo hours after the crash pointing to a Belgian mercenary pilot as the pilot of the second plane.

The most compelling evidence, however, is in the form of intercepted radio traffic. Two US intelligence officers, working at listening posts in the Mediterranean, claim to have heard evidence that the plane was shot down. One heard the words: "I've hit it. There are flames. It's going down. It's crashing." The other heard voices on two different frequencies, identifying the plane as it was coming in to land and then saying: "The Americans shot down the UN plane."

The US and CIA were certainly monitoring radio traffic that night. At Ndola airfield two US Air Force Dakotas were parked with their engines running, no doubt to power equipment intercepting local radio traffic. US listening stations in Cyprus routinely picked up radio signals in central Africa, and if Hammarskjöld in the air they would have been listening doubly hard.

The records of those intercepts are known to be contained in two classified files held by the NSA. A commission on the Hammarskjöld case, chaired by the former appeal court judge Sir Stephen Sedley, appealed to the NSA in 2013 to declassify the files, pointing out that these were the "acid test" for the theory that the plane was shot down.

Setting up the new inquiry, the UN called for "an independent team of governments to release all the evidence."

So far, the NSA has flatly refused to declassify the files, in blunt defiance of common sense, humanity and history, inevitably compounding a suspicion that America has something to hide.

The Hammarskjöld case is much more than an intriguing unsolved mystery. More than half a century later, the West's demands for the Congo's natural resources continues to fuel a war that has claimed millions of lives.

Among the philosophical reflections left by Dag Hammarskjöld were these words: "Do not seek death. Death will find you. But seek the road which makes death a fulfillment. America has a chance to fulfill Hammarskjöld's journey by opening its files and revealing once and for all, how death found him."