

Intelligence and Peacekeeping: The UN Operation in the Congo 1960-64

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It was accompanied by the following description:

"This article provides an extraordinarily well-researched look at the first effective United Nations intelligence organization, the somewhat make-shift Military Information Branch of the *Opération des Nations Unies au Congo* (ONUC). Working with original files from the Departmental Archive Group at the UN Archives in New York (see endnotes), the authors provide a superior account of the failures, the successes and the issues surrounding the vital matter of intelligence support for UN peacekeeping missions in the field, at both the operational and tactical levels."

Abstract

To be effective, peacekeepers in conflict zones must proactively acquire and painstakingly analyse information about conditions within the mission area. This is especially true if the mission is conducted in a hazardous and unpredictable environment and the lives of peacekeepers are threatened, as was the case with the UN operation in the Congo (ONUC). A Military Information Branch (MIB) was established as part of ONUC to enhance the security of UN personnel, support specific operations, warn of outbreaks of conflict and estimate outside interference (e.g., the supply of armaments). The MIB employed signals intelligence (SIGINT) using a wireless message interception system, photographic intelligence (PHOTOINT) using airplanes equipped for the purpose, and human intelligence (HUMINT) from lawful interrogations of prisoners and informants. A detailed description of the activities of the MIB is provided here for the first time, using newly uncovered archival files. The study points to the benefits, the difficulties and the "grey areas" of developing dedicated intelligence-gathering bodies.

Introduction

"We are fully aware of your long-standing limitations in gathering information. The limitations are inherent in the very nature of the United Nations and therefore of any operation conducted

by it." — UN Secretary-General U Thant to Lt-Gen. Kebede Guebre, ONUC Commander, 24 September 1962 (Code Cable #6780).

The United Nations has always been sensitive about the issue of intelligence gathering. UN officials fear that Member States, many of whom possess their own powerful and established intelligence networks, would accuse the UN of violating national sovereignty if discovered probing into their affairs without invitation. They also fear that the UN's integrity would be compromised if it were discovered to be engaged in intelligence activities, since some habitually employed intelligence techniques, such as theft, eavesdropping, surveillance and bribery, are often sinister elements of the international conflicts that the UN is committed to resolving.

Such reasoning doubtlessly underlay Secretary-General Hammarskjöld's refusal in 1960 to support the establishment of a permanent UN intelligence agency and his conviction that the UN "must have clean hands."^[1] Similarly U Thant was vigilant about maintaining strict limits on the scope of information gathering. That the UN today lacks a formal intelligence body shows that such views continue to prevail.

The UN's opposition to founding an intelligence network also carries over to resistance to the establishment of intelligence operations in its peacekeeping missions. Out of necessity, however, the UN has embraced at least some intelligence-gathering techniques and, on occasion, established dedicated intelligence bodies. This paper describes the first such organization set up by the UN: the Military Information Branch of the UN Operation in the Congo (ONUC)^[2]. This early attempt at intelligence gathering demonstrates both the benefits and problems of such bodies.