

DRC honors Patrice Lumumba 60 years after his assassination



Soldiers guard Patrice Lumumba, right, and Joseph Okito, left, following their arrest in December 1960. (Photo: AFP)

Kinshasa, January 17 (RHC)-- The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has honored independence hero Patrice Lumumba, marking 60 years since his assassination in a plot linked to the fledgling country's colonial master, Belgium.

President Felix Tshisekedi on Sunday paid tribute to the charismatic political leader at a site in the capital, Kinshasa, where a memorial is to be installed in his honour.

Lumumba became the country's first democratically elected prime minister after independence from Belgium in 1960. His government lasted just three months before he was overthrown and assassinated by firing squad.

Lumumba's body will never be recovered, however. Shot by Katangan separatists and Belgian mercenaries on January 17, 1961, during the first, chaotic months of independence, his body was dissolved in acid. The only part of his body ever recovered was a tooth seized from a Belgian policeman who, by his own account, took it while helping to dispose of the body.

Last month, Tshisekedi said Belgium would return the tooth to his family in time for independence anniversary celebrations on June 30th.

Prominent Congolese gynaecologist Denis Mukwege, the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, also paid tribute to Lumumba, calling him "one of the greatest heroes in history." Lumumba was a "man of determination who fought to the end for the freedom, the sovereignty of the #DRC", he wrote on Twitter. "A model of courage for the youth."

Lumumba was removed from his post as prime minister shortly after independence and then delivered to his death at the hands of the Katangan separatists and the mercenaries. His supporters and some historians accuse the CIA of having ordered his killing.

In 2001, a Belgian parliamentary committee acknowledged that the country was "morally responsible" for his death. In 2012, a Brussels appeals court went further, describing his murder as a war crime. An investigation in Belgium for war crimes is in its final phase, according to lawyer Christophe Marchand, who filed a complaint in 2011 on behalf of Francois Lumumba, a son of the slain leader.

"It was the Belgians who planned Lumumba's death and who carried it out," said Congolese historian Guillaume Nkongolo, referring to recently opened archives.

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