

Democratic Republic of Congo buries murdered independence hero's remains



A photo of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Emery Lumumba, at a ceremony after the remains of Lumumba were symbolically handed over to the murdered leader's children and to an official delegation, in Brussels, Belgium June 21, 2022 [File: Johanna Geron/Reuters]

Kinshasa, July 1 (RHC)-- The family of Democratic Republic of Congo's murdered independence hero Patrice Lumumba has buried his only known remains, a tooth, in the capital Kinshasa, 61 years after his death at the hands of Belgian-backed secessionist rebels.

Hundreds gathered in a vast square for the occasion on Thursday, waving flags and looking upon a large photo of Lumumba, with his trademark horn-rimmed glasses and side-swept hair, framed by white flowers.

Lumumba was killed by a firing squad on January 16, 1961, in the southeastern province of Katanga after being deposed as prime minister the previous year, all within months of DRC's independence from Belgium.

A banner with the words "Many thanks, National Hero" was suspended over the crowd, which included the president of neighbouring Congo Republic, Denis Sassou Nguesso, Belgium's foreign minister and several African ambassadors.

"Finally, the Congolese people can have the honor of offering a burial to their illustrious prime minister," President Felix Tshisekedi said. "We are ending ... mourning we started 61 years ago."

The funeral was held on the 62nd anniversary of the central African country's independence. On that day, Lumumba had given a fiery speech lambasting Belgium's 75-year colonization of Congo.

By some estimates, killings, famine and disease killed up to 10 million Congolese during the first 23 years of Belgium's rule from 1885 to 1960, when King Leopold II ruled the Congo Free State as a personal fiefdom. Villages that missed rubber collection quotas were notoriously made to provide severed hands instead.

While Belgium's King Phillippe, who visited the country for the first time last month, has admitted that Belgian colonial rule was unjustifiable and racist, he stopped short of an apology.

DRC's first democratically elected prime minister, Lumumba alarmed the West with his Pan-African ideals and movement for African liberation. His government lasted just three months before he was overthrown and assassinated -- with the help of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, the CIA.

A Belgian parliamentary investigation into Lumumba's killing concluded in 2002 that Belgium was "morally responsible" for his death. The body was never found. His only remaining tooth was reportedly taken by a Belgian policeman, Gerard Soete, who claimed to have dissolved much of the corpse in acid and burned the rest. Belgium handed over the tooth to Lumumba's family on June 20.

"Your return home, the honors you are receiving here are a page of the history you continue to write," one of his granddaughters said in a letter to Lumumba that she read at the funeral. "With you, today, Africa is writing its own history," she said.

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