

United Nations Association

Westminster Branch

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Update 9

Is Ban Ki-moon's Panel on Hammarskjöld's death running out of time to properly complete its report?

1 June 2015 Observers following the progress of the Hammarskjöld Panel appointed by UN S-G Ban Ki-moon to examine new information on the death of former S-G Dag Hammarskjöld in 1961 fear that it might have to compromise its programme as its budget extends only to 30 June 2015, when it must present its report. The Panel, with the remit of evaluating the new information for its probative value, began its work as recently as April, thus allowing for barely three months of investigation.

The Panel members are eminent experts in highly relevant disciplines. However, observers point to key issues which the Panel's report might not have time to address adequately. One issue is that the Panel needs to understand the colonial mindset and context of British-ruled Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia, in which the original UN Inquiry of 1961-62 was conducted.

There is understandable sensitivity that in re-opening the Inquiry, the UN needs to show due recognition of the treatment of colonised nations in Africa and of the conduct of the superpowers at the time of the accident. A number of African eye witness accounts of aircraft movements over Ndola airport at the time of the crash challenged official reports – and these accounts were disregarded as inherently unreliable by the original UN Inquiry, reiterating the approach of the inquiries by the colonial authorities. The release of various documents many years later supports their recollection. It follows that their claims to have witnessed extraordinary sightings in the sky, dismissed at the time, should be re-examined fully. [The Panel visited Ndola](#) to interview eye witnesses but observers worry that the Panel will have had insufficient time to listen carefully to all witnesses, to set them in context, and to reach any conclusions.

In addition, it is important to know whether or not the Panel is getting traction for S-G Ban Ki-moon's request to Member States for the release of 'any relevant records in their possession'. The US government has not released into the public domain relevant documentation held by CIA, NSA and the State Department, even though these records are well over 50 years old. Nor has the UK government released any material held by MI5, MI6 or GCHQ, even though an MI6 official was at Ndola for six days surrounding the crash in activities relating to Hammarskjöld's visit. Belgium, France and South Africa may also hold relevant files, as may the UN itself. What records have the Panel seen? How comprehensive have the disclosures been? Are those records now available to the public?

The Panel will surely not be able to write an authoritative report on the probative value of the new evidence unless all relevant documentation has been released by the countries involved.

Budgetary issues appear to be driving the UN Panel's agenda. With only US\$500, 000 to spend, its work must complete by the end of June and it is this finance-driven deadline that worries observers. In the UK, the recent conclusion of investigations into the Hillsborough football stadium tragedy of 1989 illustrates that such exercises can lead to great expenditure but, at the same time, it is important to the community that closure is both authoritative and transparent. "We owe it to the deceased, to their families and relatives, and also to the wider global community, to undertake everything possible to establish the truth. To those who insist it is a waste of time to review such events from history, we would argue that the injustice felt at the time still resonates today" said David Wardrop, Chairman of United Nations Association Westminster branch, co-ordinator of the international campaign to re-open the Inquiry. "At a time when critics of the UN System and its Member States challenge its determination to manifest the principle of transparency, it is on such issues that it and they will be judged."

Background

The UN Panel comprises Chief Justice Mohamed Chande Othman (Tanzania), aviation specialist Kerry Macaulay (Australia) and ballistics expert Henrik Larsen (Denmark).

Over more than fifty years, much new information has emerged. The book *Who Killed Hammarskjöld* (2011) by Susan Williams provides a useful guide to key documents and to rival theories and led to the setting up of the independent and international Hammarskjöld Commission, comprising distinguished retired jurists. The 2013 Report of the Commission persuaded Ban Ki-moon to seek agreement from the UN General Assembly to set up the new Panel.

For the Hammarskjöld Commission Report, see <http://www.hammar skjoldcommission.org>