The U.N.’s Complicity in a Congo Murder

May 23, 2017

The New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/23/opinion/un-congo-murder.html>

The Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire, has endured a remarkably cruel history, with successive presidents, rebels and foreign powers endlessly pillaging its rich resources and leaving behind a trail of massacres, rapes and devastation. The military has contributed its share of atrocities, and the current president, Joseph Kabila, has compounded the chaos by refusing to step down or hold elections since his term ended last December.

So when a pair of United Nations contract investigators were kidnapped and murdered [in March](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/28/world/africa/missing-un-experts-congo.html), it was fair to ask how they came to ride into a remote and violence-torn area on motorbike taxis with only an interpreter at their side and without much training, safety equipment or even health insurance. An article by Times reporters Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura and Somini Sengupta on Saturday details an astoundingly [irresponsible approach](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/20/world/africa/congo-zaida-catalan-michael-j-sharp-united-nations-democratic-republic-of-congo.html) by the United Nations to an obviously dangerous and hugely important task.

Zaida Catalán, a 36-year-old Swedish-Chilean, and Michael Sharp, a 34-year-old American, are only two of millions of people who have lost their lives to Congo’s endemic strife, all victims of senseless greed in a rich and fertile land that could be among the most prosperous on the African continent. The tragedy is that Ms. Catalán and Mr. Sharp represented the organization that is meant to combat lawlessness and thus give the Congolese hope for the future. Their deaths did the opposite.

Neither of the investigators appears to have been prepared for the dangerous world they were assigned to investigate. Ms. Catalán had worked for the Swedish Green Party and as an expert on sexual violence for a European Union mission in Congo. Mr. Sharp had come to Congo in 2012 on a Mennonite humanitarian mission, and signed on with the United Nations in 2015. They were assigned to investigate a massacre in the remote Kasai region of central Congo, where the government has been trying to put down yet another tribal uprising. They had neither adequate training, nor safety equipment, nor even health insurance. Their bodies were discovered in a shallow grave, Ms. Catalán’s decapitated.

Whether the United Nations really has the tools to intervene usefully in a country as chaotic as Congo is debatable. A peacekeeping force has been in Congo since 1999, but it has little to show for the billions it has cost. What is not debatable is that when the United Nations sends people into harm’s way, it must ensure that they are properly trained and equipped.

The Times’s article said almost two months passed before the world organization assembled a panel to look into what went wrong, and the Security Council, which could order a more formal investigation, has done nothing. The United Nations must take far greater responsibility for the security and preparation of the people it sends to the hellholes of the world. Their lives depend on it, as does their mission as symbols of justice and hope.