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U.N. Chief Presses to Unlock Mystery of Dag Hammarskjold's Death

By ALAN COWELL SEPT. 6, 2016

LONDON — A few days from now, the anniversary of one of the most enduring international mysteries will slide by, hardly likely to be marked by those in Britain and the United States accused of withholding the secret clues to its resolution.

On the night of Sept. 17-18, 1961, an airplane carrying Dag Hammarskjold, the [United Nations](#) secretary general, crashed near the airport in Ndola in what was then called Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia. Mr. Hammarskjold was on a mission to end a secessionist war next door in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. All 16 people aboard the plane perished.

Since then, a succession of inquiries have suggested that pilot error was what one investigator called the “default explanation.” But the supposition was never conclusively proved, while other theories — including the possibility that Mr. Hammarskjold’s DC-6B was brought down — have never been definitively ruled out.

That enigmatic stalemate seemed destined to persist as Britain and the United States stonewalled requests by the current secretary general, [Ban Ki-moon](#), to divulge sensitive material.

But in recent weeks there have been signs that, in the closing days of his second and final term, Mr. Ban is still seeking to illuminate the destiny of his distant predecessor. He is pressing for the appointment of “an eminent person or persons” to review what has become a steady stream of potential evidence about the events of September 1961, in or over the woodlands outside Ndola.

One of the clues relates to “Operation Celeste,” described in an [article in Foreign Policy magazine](#) last month as a plot by “an apartheid-era South African paramilitary organization that was backed by the C.I.A., British intelligence and a Belgian mining company.” All three shared an aversion to Mr. Hammarskjold’s vision of a unified Congo.

The shadowy outfit was known as the South African Institute of Maritime Research. Word of the purported conspiracy first surfaced in 1998 in a file

of documents unearthed by South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

According to the authoritative "[Who Killed Hammarskjold?](#)" by Susan Williams, published in Britain in 2011, the plot involved planting explosives in the nose-wheel area of Mr. Hammarskjold's plane.

[In a note on Aug. 17](#), Mr. Ban said that United Nations investigators had seen only "poor quality copies" of the original Celeste documents, but "if it is the case that original documents may now be available from South Africa, it may be possible to conduct forensic or other analyses to make a determination of their authenticity."

In the many years since the crash, of course, memories have begun to fade or weaken. Crucial witnesses have died, including an American naval commander, Charles M. Southall, who said he had heard a recording of an unidentified pilot claiming to have shot down the DC-6B.

"This may be our last chance to find the truth," Mr. Ban said.

In Britain, the recent developments have revived the long-running dispute. "There are many conspiracy theories," said Brian Unwin, a former diplomat who described himself as "almost certainly the only British official still living who was present at Ndola airport throughout the fateful night."

But without evidence to the contrary, [he wrote in a letter to The Guardian](#), "I shall continue to believe that the tragic crash was due to pilot error."

That prompted [a riposte from Richard J. Goldstone](#), a South African judge who sat on a panel of internationalist jurists that investigated the affair.

It is highly likely, Mr. Goldstone wrote, that United Nations member states, "especially but not only the U.S., hold records or transcripts of cockpit transmissions in the minutes before the plane came down. If so, these may well put the cause of the crash, whatever it was, beyond doubt."

What, indeed, many specialists have asked, could be so toxic that those records must remain occluded today?

Mr. Ban has urged governments to declassify their secrets. Until they do, their reticence could be interpreted as pointing less to conspiracy theories than to a conspiracy of silence.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/07/world/europe/dag-hammarskjold-death-ban-ki-moon.html>