

Welcome to all of you, whether here in London, or online around the world, to this conference on:

*Dag Hammarskjöld's Plane Crash: The Continuing Search for Truth
Next Steps for the UN Commission of Inquiry*

The Institute of Commonwealth Studies of London University is really delighted to host this event with the Westminster United Nations Association.

The chair of Westminster United Nations Association, David Wardrop, is here with me, and will be contributing throughout the day.

Background

The aim of this gathering is to examine where we are at with this case – the search for the truth – and what the next steps are for the UN Commission of Inquiry.

UN Commissions of Inquiry are a special interest of mine and one of my main areas of focus for the past five years as an international lawyer – and in fact I am off to Geneva in a few days to join a conference on how to improve their operation.

Many of you will know that shortly after midnight on 17 – 18 September 1961, the aircraft carrying UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld and 15 others crashed on its approach to Ndola airport, in the British colony of Northern Rhodesia, which is now Zambia.

Hammarskjöld was on the way to meet Moïse Tshombe, the leader of the secession of Katanga province from the newly-independent Congo.

Mineral-rich Katanga was of geostrategic importance, not least because of a mine in Katanga which produced the richest uranium in the world.

The secession of Katanga was backed by the government of Belgium, white supremacist mercenaries, by the apartheid regimes of South Africa and Rhodesia, by major western multi-nationals, and covertly by the CIA. It is not surprising that the crash of Hammarskjöld's plane, just over

the border from Katanga, immediately gave rise to worldwide suspicions of foul play.

We'll hear more during today's conference about Hammarskjöld as a leader and as a peacemaker, and about the complex politics of the Congo crisis and decolonisation.

There were three inquiries shortly after the crash. As a result of the one established by the Rhodesian colonial authorities, it came to be widely, but inaccurately, believed that the cause of the crash had been established as pilot error.

A contemporary UN inquiry, however, reached an open verdict and stated that it could not rule out sabotage or attack. As a result, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution requesting the Secretary-General to inform it of any new evidence which might come to his attention.

Almost fifty years later, following the publication in 2011 of Susan Williams's book *Who Killed Hammarskjöld?*, the Hammarskjöld Commission, an international group of four distinguished jurists, chaired by Sir Stephen Sedley, was established. The Commission reviewed carefully all of the evidence available and recommended that the UN conduct a further investigation and seek access to relevant records, held by Member States.

Since 2015 that UN investigation has been led by Justice Mohamed Chande Othman. The consensus that the cause of the crash was pilot error has changed. In the words of Justice Othman,

From the totality of the information at hand, it appears plausible that an external attack or threat may have been a cause of the crash, whether by way of a direct attack ... or by distracting the pilots at the critical stage of preparing to land.

It is Justice Othman's investigation we are focusing on today and hoping to be able to assist.

Since 2017 Justice Othman has explicitly asked some UN Member States for specific items of information and also to appoint independent high-ranking officials to review their security and intelligence records. Some Member States - notably Belgium, Sweden, and Zimbabwe - have worked strenuously to assist. However, the US, the UK, and South Africa - the Member States which Justice Othman has identified as most likely to hold relevant intelligence and security records - have

approached the matter very differently. None of them has disclosed any significant information at all since 2017.

In his 2022 report, Justice Othman drew favourable attention to the information that has been brought to light by the voluntary efforts of independent researchers. Many of those independent researchers are online, and in this room, today.

At this point I'd like you to hear the words of the current UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres in September 2023 at the ceremony to mark the 62nd anniversary of Hammarskjöld's death.

I want to particularly draw your attention to these words of the Secretary-General:

We have a shared responsibility to pursue the truth – for Dag Hammarskjöld and those who died alongside him, for their loved ones, and for the United Nations and the people we serve. I remain personally committed to that quest and intend to write to relevant Member States on the matter.

All of us hope that as a result of the presentations we are to hear today and the subsequent discussions, we can identify concrete ways of assisting the Secretary-General and Justice Othman in that “shared responsibility to pursue the truth”.

But time is critical. That cannot be emphasised too much. Justice Othman needs information in the next few months so that

- he can report to the UN Secretary-General in July this year, and
- the Secretary-General can report to the UN General Assembly in September.

We need to pursue our work today with energy and an appropriate sense of urgency.

We have a rich programme of presentations and I'm delighted to report that we will be hearing later this afternoon from the UN Assistant Secretary of State for Legal Affairs, Stephen Mathias, who I'm sure will add to these messages with the authority of his office.

As I said, Hammarskjöld's death in 1961 took place in what is now the independent UN Member State of Zambia. It now gives me great

pleasure to welcome Her Excellency Macenje Florence Mazoka, the High Commissioner for the Republic of Zambia to the UK. Her Excellency has very kindly agreed to say a few words to start this most important conference.