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BELGIAN CONGO: If Blood Must Run

In the broad-boulevarded tropical city of Leopoldville one day last month, a security officer handed the Belgian Governor General a piece of paper with a song written on it. The composer was unknown, but the song itself was being sung at nationalist meetings throughout the territory. "Congoland, land of our forebears," ran the opening lines, "we will fight for your freedom, if blood must run in streams." Last week, after the worst eruption the Congo had seen in a decade, blood did in fact run in Léopoldville (pop. 300,000).

In Brussels the reaction was stunned surprise. For 50 years the Belgians have—with model efficiency and unruffled complacency—run the land, 80 times the size of their own. That was once the private property of King Leopold II. They kept the 12.8 million blacks strictly segregated and denied them the vote—but then, the 107,000 white residents had no vote either, and paternalism had many advantages for all. It was not until 1957 that the Congolese, black or white, were allowed to take part in their first municipal elections, and the government has never clearly said how much more self-government can be expected.

On a Leopard Skin. Among the blacks there had sprung up a quasi-religious group called Abako, which Belgian newspapers brushed off as merely a tribal organization. Originally it had been formed by the Bakongo tribe of the south as a sort of protective union against the harder-working and more favored Bangalas. But under the leadership of a slight, timid-looking but steel-willed fanatic named Joseph Kasavubu, 41, it gradually turned its anger upon bigger targets.

Just across the Congo River from Leopoldville sits Brazzaville (pop. 86,000), capital of French Equatorial Africa, which has been astir with De Gaulle's promise of autonomy. Kasavubu began to dream of reviving the fabled 14th century kingdom of the Congo, combining territories now French, Belgian and Portuguese. After his election as one of Léopoldville's commune burgomasters in 1957, he had himself declared "Supreme Leader" by his followers, and began receiving homage seated on a leopard skin, symbol of tribal supreme power. Meanwhile, the rival Bangalas also began organizing, and the bush telegraph began to echo

the nationalist sentiments of the recent All African Peoples Conference in Accra. To make matters worse, the demand for Congolese copper ore hit a slump, and jobless natives swarmed into the city to find work. Finally, one day last week, 4,000 blacks jammed into the courtyard of a Y.M.C.A. to hear Kasavubu speak at an unauthorized protest meeting. When the police arrived, the riots began.

"Down with Belgium." With cries of "Independence!", "Down with Belgium!" and "Vive Ghana!", the crowd surged down Prince Baudouin Avenue, was soon joined by thousands of spectators who were just then emerging from the football stadium. The swollen mob swept through the city, upset and burned cars, stoned and mauled Europeans, pillaged shops. Bands looted public buildings and invaded mission schools, concentrating their fury on Roman Catholic more than on Protestant schools (though Kasavubu, mission-educated, studied philosophy for three years as a Catholic seminarian). Under orders from their Belgian officers, African police opened fire, and Belgian paratroopers manned key points about the European part of the city. But for two whole days the rioting continued, until an estimated 175 people had been killed.

In Brussels a hushed special session of Parliament quickly voted to send an investigatory mission. The new Minister of the Congo, Maurice van Hemelrijck, a longtime critic of Belgian complacency and the author of a long-awaited proposal for the Congo's gradual emancipation that is to be presented to Parliament this week, gave his countrymen a brief but pointed lecture. "We have been on the border of catastrophe," he said. "We are not without fault. We could not wait so long without punishment before letting the Congolese know of our intentions."

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