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THE BELGIAN CONGO: Return of the Mundeles

For a prosperous half-century, tiny Belgium successfully ruled the vast, mineral-rich Congo with what seemed to be the most foolproof of colonial formulas: steady economic progress, combined with almost no political progress at all. But as the virus of nationalism spread across Africa and the newly autonomous republics of Charles de Gaulle's French Community sprang up throughout the continent, the Belgian Congo suddenly caught freedom fever. Early this year, after Leopoldville, capital of the Congo, exploded in the bloodiest race riots the colony had known in a decade (TIME, Jan. 19), Belgium hastily promised gradual independence "without fatal delays and without rash haste." Last week, despite all of Belgium's careful timetables (local council elections next December, establishment of the first parliament next year), the freedom-hungry Congo appeared to be hurtling headlong toward chaos.

Since January, a bewildering array of 60 political parties has emerged in the Congo. New groups and splinter groups form with such rapidity that one Congolese leader found that the party he heads had split in two while he was flying from Leopoldville to Brussels last week. The most powerful Congolese politician is Joseph Kasavubu, 42, one of Leopoldville's ten native commune burgomasters. But Kasavubu's Abako Party represents mostly the Bakongo people of the southwest, who want immediate independence only for themselves. Abako's chief rival is the National Congolese Movement Party, headed by a flamboyant convicted embezzler who wants independence without bothering with elections until later. From a Belgian point of view, there is little to choose between the two major parties—or the 58 other varieties; the main objective of all is to get rid of Belgian rule.

Corned Beef & Congolese. Besides bombarding Belgian officials and missionaries with letters threatening them with death unless they clear out, the Congolese have begun quarreling among themselves. Last week, at the Kitona paratroop base, 180 men were wounded, after a band of Bakongo tribesmen threw up picket lines to keep non-Bakongo workers away from their jobs. In Moanda, where the Abako Party has been accusing chiefs of selling out *depinda* (independence) for a million Congolese francs, at least one chief's house has been burned to the ground, and tension runs so high that Belgian youngsters now go to school escorted by troops carrying Tommy guns.

But of all the sources of tension, the most dramatic has been the return of what the Congolese call the Mundele ya Mwinda, the White Man with the Lantern. The Mundele superstition goes back to the time when Belgian officials would come into a village at night to round up Congolese males for forced labor. Gradually, the blacks began to see these officials as one all-powerful demon, whose lantern cast an evil spell. Though no one knows exactly who brought the legend of the evil White Man back to life, thousands of Congolese are today convinced that he is once again stalking the land to hypnotize blacks with his lantern and then grind them up into corned beef.

Big & Quick. In recent weeks, nationalist agitators have begun distributing long lists of license-plate numbers belonging to cars the Mundele is supposed to own. Some of the cars belong to Europeans, others to native political opponents of the listmakers; all are in peril of being burned by mobs, and in the past week, five have been. In Leopoldville, black parents have been taking their children out of schools whose teachers are said to be under the Mundele's spell. A shipment of European sports cars with evil-looking radiators and outsized exhaust pipes nearly got dumped in the river, when the story spread that these were the Mundele's meat-grinding machines. And Africans and Belgians alike have been beaten up, merely on the suspicion that they might be agents of the Mundele.

Largely as a result of such terrorism, an estimated 7,000 Belgians have left the colony and European capital is fleeing as well. In Belgium, the feeling is growing that whatever the government decides to do about the Congo, its concessions will have to be big and quick. Says Leo Collard, president of the opposition Socialist Party: "It's no use finding unrealistic time schedules for gradual independence now that the Congolese seem determined to decide their own future. This we have to bear in mind, if we want to prevent a second Algeria."

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