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BELGIAN CONGO: Now Now Now

Hoping to keep up with the hot spirit of independence that is racing through the Congo like fire in dry bush, Belgium is holding elections there in December to offer a modicum of local self-rule, as a forerunner of a promised national government by Africans in 1964. But Congolese Africans, in a land 99% black, are impatiently several jumps ahead of the process.

Bidding for political power, the Lower Congo's Abako Party announced it would boycott the December vote rather than submit to the "slowness" of Brussels' timetable. Hoping to gain control of the rival Congolese National Movement, an ambitious politician named Patrice Lumumba increased the ante. Fiery Lumumba, a 33-year-old former postal clerk and convicted embezzler, cried, "Total independence NOW NOW NOW," at a Stanleyville meeting of his followers, many of them armed with spears and painted as if for battle. Police rushed in to arrest Lumumba, and his supporters fought back, touching off two days of rioting in which more than 70 Africans were killed, hundreds more wounded.

In Brussels, Parliament was called back into special session to discuss the riots. Minister of the Congo Auguste De Schrijver announced that he would visit the Congo himself this month to confer with Congolese leaders. "I ask, nay I implore, all concerned to renew the dialogue between Belgians and Congolese," said De Schrijver plaintively. The Socialist opposition wanted De Schrijver and the government to be ready to negotiate independence now with the Africans. "Why wait for elections when you know the major parties will boycott it?" demanded Socialist Leader Léon Collard.

There is a good chance that the Congolese African leaders will boycott De Schrijver's conference as well as the December elections. "Nineteen Sixty will be a year of war and misery," predicted Troublemaker Lumumba before he was led off to jail by the Stanleyville police. As if fearing this prediction was all too accurate, Belgians began flying troop reinforcements south to the Congo.

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