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SPEECH BY ACTING SECRETARY-GENERAL U THANT
TO THE UNITED NATIONS ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED KINGDOM
LONDON, 5 JULY 1962 *

The United Nations in the Congo

I am delighted to have the opportunity to address the United Nations Association of the United Kingdom. It is an association with a long-standing record of support and understanding of international organizations and affairs, and is known throughout the world as a model of what this kind of association should be.

The United Nations, in its seventeenth year of existence, is, to be sure, a quite different organization from what was envisaged at San Francisco. Its membership has grown greatly and its activities, responding to the problems confronting it, cover a very wide range. Experience over the years has shown that the United Nations, to be effective and merit confidence, possibly even to survive, must be able and willing to respond to the most severe challenges. But to respond successfully to challenges, the United Nations must have the understanding, support and constructive criticism of the people of its Member States. It is largely through the work of associations such as yours that such understanding and support can be attained.

Of the many practical challenges facing the United Nations, the situation in the Congo is perhaps the most complex, and has, in the past, at any rate, been one of the most urgent. The complexity and difficulty of the Congo situation, and of the efforts to alleviate or control it, are in proportion to the number and variety of the interests involved in that large and fascinating country. In the Congo one finds conflicting interests and opinions at every level -- at the levels of world power politics, high finance and the political interests of emerging Africa and, internally, at the level of national political competition and tribal rivalry. Also competing on this over-crowded stage are adventurers of various kinds attracted by the natural wealth of the country, by the possibility of making a quick gain from confusion and disorder, or even by the exotic and exciting nature of the scene.

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* At a luncheon to be given in his honor at 1:15 p.m. local time (8:15 a.m. EDT).

The role of the policeman, protector and adviser is not always a happy one, as a distinguished English song-writer has pointed out. It is small wonder, therefore, that many harsh things have been said over the past two years -- sometimes, perhaps, even with a certain justification -- about the United Nations Operation in the Congo. But when I think of these strictures and criticisms, I take courage from two considerations: One is that they have come from many opposing sides, and especially from people of extreme views or with special interests. This gives me the feeling that United Nations efforts at objectivity and impartiality have been, on the whole, successful. Secondly, the enormous interest in the United Nations Operation in the Congo illustrates very clearly both the vital nature of that work and the unique problems which have to be faced, and can only be faced, by the world organization. I do not for a moment suggest that mistakes have not been made and that, especially in the light of hind-sight, some parts of the operation could not have been better conducted. But I must also say very frankly that the nature both of the situation in the Congo and of the problems and the position of the United Nations there has more often than not been seriously misunderstood, and therefore criticised for the wrong reasons.

The United Nations position in the Congo, quite apart from the complex and often confused nature of the local scene, is a difficult and unusual one. It is there to advise and assist the Government of the Congo, but not to usurp its power or authority. Nonetheless, its eminence as an organization and the essential role it plays at the present time in the affairs of the Congo give it, in the public mind, a responsibility for whatever happens, which is quite out of proportion to the limited nature of its authority, resources and powers vis-a-vis the Congolese authorities. Thus, the United Nations is liable to be blamed for whatever happens, and to be asked to take responsibility for many eventualities which are, in fact, within the domain of the Government of the Congo. One of the most important roles of the United Nations in conflicts or difficulties is that of a lightning conductor or, perhaps more accurately, of the old English institution of the Aunt Sally -- the large and conspicuous figure at which things can be thrown both with impunity and with an almost complete certainty of hitting the target.

There can be no doubt that in this strange and unprecedented operation the United Nations has from time to time been jostled or abused or found itself in an undignified position. Lives have been lost, including that of my great predecessor, Dag Hammarskjöld; there has been violence, and from time to time remarks and accusations have been made in various quarters, including some with strong vested interests in the Congo, which have hardly been suitable either to the dignity of the world organization or to the gravity of the task it faces in the Congo. But

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this situation has attracted so much attention perhaps primarily because it constitutes the most striking current example of the problems of rapid historical change, and the United Nations, as the elected moderator of those consequences, must inevitably accept the risks and insults involved.

It is hard to think of a working alternative to the United Nations Operation in the Congo. In 1960 the world faced, in that vast and newly independent country, a desperate danger, compounded of internal chaos and potential external intervention. It faced an almost classic example of rapid change overtaking all those concerned and leaving them helpless and confused -- Africans and Europeans alike.

I therefore feel impelled to list, if only briefly, some of the successes which I believe the Government of the Congo and the United Nations have together achieved in these past two years.

Despite the initial mutiny of the Army and the nation-wide breakdown of confidence, law and order now exist again in the Congo, even if they may be disturbed occasionally in some areas by political and tribal differences. Despite the departure in July 1960 of many key European workers, essential public and private services have been preserved and kept working, even though sometimes temporarily on a reduced scale; and in recent months the Europeans have been returning.

Despite the extreme confusion of the political situation in the early days of independence, the Parliament was finally reconvened in July 1961 through United Nations effort and its protection, and approved the Constitution of a Central Government universally recognized and now gaining daily in strength and experience.

In spite of various secessionist tendencies or movements, there is now a steady trend towards national reconciliation. Especially, the vexed question of Katanga, which has raised, as I well know, much honest, though not always well-informed, interest and indignation in this country, has been discussed intensively and practically by Prime Minister Adoula and Mr. Tshombe in Leopoldville. Although the talks are now suspended, great efforts are being made for their resumption.

In this effort at conciliation, we are also beginning to see at last a new comprehension by the outside interests involved of the great issues at stake and a new willingness on their part to use every influence in the direction of a united and stable Congo. This is, indeed, an encouraging development. The famine among 300,000 Baluba refugees in Kasai in the winter of 1960-1961 was dealt with successfully by a great international humanitarian effort. The United Nations and its affiliate agencies are also wrestling with the economic and fiscal problems of the Congo.

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Finally, the great basic problem of the Congo -- lack of training, experience and qualifications -- is being tackled. It is a long and arduous job to equip a country, roughly the same area as India, with all the public and private professional people and know-how which it requires to secure its future, and, unfortunately, two years ago such people and training scarcely existed at all among the Congolese population. Political tension and pressures from outside have not made the task any easier, but, nonetheless, the first results are now beginning to show, and the programme of training and assistance, so essential to the successful future of the Congo, has, under United Nations auspices, gathered considerable momentum.

I would like to conclude by asking you to view the United Nations role as the agent and moderator of historic change in the world in general, and in the Congo in particular, in the light of some of the things I have said. The English way of thought and your tradition of administration, and the bringing of peoples to self-government provide the inhabitants of this country with an inherited basis for a sound judgment in such matters. Despite the revolutionary changes that have taken place and are still taking place in this world, I believe this basis for judgment, and the talents that go with it, can be immensely valuable both to the United Kingdom and to the world community, always provided that it is turned towards the future and not towards the past. There are, no doubt, very difficult times ahead in Africa and elsewhere in the world. But there is also, as never before, a growing feeling of international solidarity, which finds its most practical expression in some of the programmes of the United Nations. It is in this spirit that I hope you will understand the brief remarks that I have made, and in this spirit also that you will continue your efforts on behalf of the United Nations in particular and international co-operation and understanding in general.

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