

Congo: No Rhyme, No Reason

From the Congo the world has learned to expect a regular diet of anarchy and confusion. Events last week provided the usual obscure fare, but through the mist of conflicting reports three disturbing facts were becoming increasingly clear: (1) Premier Moise Tshombe is failing in his attempt to pull together a workable government that can control the country; (2) the anti-government rebels, acting with Red Chinese guidance, are steadily making gains and are now active in nearly a third of the nation; (3) in the absence of any other outsiders to help the demoralized Congolese National Army (ANC) turn the rebels back, the U.S. is being inexorably swept into the Congo whirlpool with greater commitments of arms, transport planes, and the all-too familiar helicopters guarded by American GIs.

Washington fought hard to keep from getting entangled in the Congo. Under Secretary of State W. Averell Harriman tried to talk the Belgians into providing the professional leadership the ANC so badly needs, but the once-burned Belgians would have none of it (Newsweek, Aug. 17). Other African nations, particularly Nigeria, were approached to lend a hand at peace-keeping efforts. But none of them was willing to help Tshombe, whose name is still anathema in much of Black Africa.

Misgivings: The U.S., too, has some misgivings about supporting a man who only two years ago was its chief antagonist in the Congo. But Washington believes there is no other alternative. And with the rebels moving ahead daily, the U.S. finally decided it would have to step in and go it alone.

Operating on the theory that a few well-disciplined units of the Congolese

Army could be effective if they were transported quickly from one trouble spot to another, Washington last week dispatched to Leopoldville four huge C-130 jet transports capable of ferrying 90 soldiers each and landing on tight 500-yard runways. With them went maintenance crews and 42 paratroopers assigned to guard the planes—and also to “fly shotgun” in three U.S. helicopters which officials claim will be confined to rescue operations.

The parallel with the initial U.S. involvement in South Vietnam was too obvious to be ignored—by friend and foe alike. Democratic Sen. John Stennis of Mississippi, a consistent supporter of a firm foreign policy, questioned whether sending the C-130s would not “ultimately lead to a heavy commitment of men and material.” Peking immediately charged the U.S. with trying to turn the Congo into an African Vietnam.

Isolated: Clearly not unaware of the analogy themselves, Washington officials stressed the differences between the two countries. Unlike Vietnam, they pointed out, the Congo is an isolated country without any great nation such as China threatening its borders. Its size (equal to all the U.S. east of the Mississippi) defies military logistics, and U.S. aid, it is hoped, will be confined to transportation plus communications equipment and technicians to operate it.

In a further effort to bolster Tshombe's regime, Washington sent G. Mennen Williams, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, to Leopoldville last week to assess its needs. But through it all, Tshombe seemed to stand pathetically on the sidelines. He made an attempt to establish a coalition government that included André Lubaya, one of many

rebel leaders affiliated with the Communist-backed National Committee of Liberation (NCL). As soon as Lubaya promised Tshombe his support, however, he was denounced by other NCL chiefs. The situation is so confusing that Tshombe cannot find which NCL man to negotiate with. “Negotiate?” he asked plaintively at a recent press conference. “With whom? Some of the so-called rebel leaders have signed papers with me, but it doesn't do any good. Nobody really controls the rebels, so nobody can stop them.”

He is not far from right. Gaston Emile Soumialot, who supposedly runs the rebellion in the eastern Congo, declared himself the “new Patrice Lumumba” after the capture of Stanleyville two weeks ago. But a certain “General” Nicholas Olenga has materialized from nowhere and now apparently issues all executive orders. The same muddle over who is boss seems to prevail wherever the rebels are active.

Seesaw: Nevertheless, the rebels are still united in their opposition to Leopoldville and in their allegiance to the NCL. As of last week, they controlled Stanleyville, Albertville, and a half-dozen other key cities in the east, and were renewing their attacks in Kwilu Province, which is dangerously close to the capital. After a seesaw battle, Baudouinville in northeastern Katanga was in government hands at the weekend, but other towns were caving in fast.

Using psychological warfare techniques undoubtedly taught by their Chinese mentors, the rebels radioed Luluabourg from Stanleyville, saying: “This is the high command of the People's Army. Have our soldiers arrived in Luluabourg?” “No,” the startled Luluabourg operator answered. “Don't worry,” crackled the airwaves, “they soon will.” Such tactics were all that the fearful government garrisons in several towns