

WH6411-29-6470-6471_scroller

Date: 1964-11-24

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Robert S. McNamara

Start Time: 07:20

Place: LBJ Ranch

SCROLLER TITLE: "Militarily, A Highly Successful Operation"

SCENE SETTER: Secretary of Defense Robert S. "Bob" McNamara reported to President Johnson on the outcome of the hostage rescue operation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. McNamara noted that the operation had been a success militarily, despite the deaths of numerous hostages. While the operation carried the taint of colonialism, it prevented more hostages from being killed—a development that would have generated, he thought, even more criticism of Washington.

Robert S. "Bob" McNamara: I just wanted to bring you up to date on the Belgian operation—on the Congo. It came off, as I think you're aware, at eleven o'clock last night, Eastern Standard Time, when 545 Belgians were dropped. No casualties from fire during the drop. Two or three soldiers were injured—broken ankles and things of that kind. Twelve U.S. C-130s participated. Four were hit by ground fire. One sustained major damage in a fuel tank. All, however, landed safely at Leopoldville. No U.S. casualties in the aircraft at all.

The aircraft was secured—the airfield was secured in about half an hour, which was excellent under the circumstances. The city was entered in about 45 minutes after the start of the drop. The European hostages had been rounded up by the rebels into two groups: one group was out near the airport; the other was, in effect, in a square of the city. There were 60 to 75 U.S. personnel in a hotel, and we think that, of these, as many as 15 . . . Let me start again. There were 60 to 75 personnel, including some U.S.—mostly Belgians, however—in a hotel. And of the five—of the 60 to 75, 15 were killed by the rebels, shooting indiscriminately into the mob. Thirty were wounded. There were about 250 European civilians herded into a square. Rebels fired into those; about 15 were killed and 40 wounded. So it looks as though something on the order of 30 hostages were killed and maybe 70 wounded.

Our consul, the man named [Michael P. E.] Hoyt, H-O-Y-T, is reported well and has been evacuated, we believe. Dr. [Paul E.] Carlson, the missionary, we believe, is dead. The [Frédéric] Vandewalle column, which was the column led by mercenaries, entered the city about five hours after the drop started and linked up with the Belgian paratroopers. And the Vandewalle column captured the Camp Ketele, which was on the eastern side of the city and was the center of the rebel power area where the other hostages had been reported. Our C-130s have been running missions between Stanleyville and Leopoldville, evacuating the refugees. About 200 to 300 have already been taken out, and about 500 more remain to be taken out. We think we'll take out about half with C-130s and the other half with commercial aircraft. So far, it's been, I should say, militarily, a highly successful operation, but the casualties to the hostages have been heavy.

President Johnson: How many Americans do you anticip[ate]—

McNamara: We don't really know. As you know, we thought there were about 25 American hostages there, with some 600-odd Belgian hostages. And we don't know that any Americans were either killed or wounded, but my guess is that there must have been some.

President Johnson: What about—

McNamara: Other than Carlson, as I mentioned, who we believe is dead.

President Johnson: What'd they do, just make him pay the price when their—

McNamara: Well, we don't have the exact details of his death here. We don't know whether he was killed ahead of time or during the episode. I believe it was ahead of time, but I'm not absolutely positive of that.

President Johnson: Any rebels killed?

McNamara: I'm sure there were, but we don't have reports of that, either.

President Johnson: Who would kill them? Paratroopers?

McNamara: The Belgian paratroopers, yes. And the Vandewalle column, coming in from the other side.

President Johnson: What's the reaction in our country, in your judge[ment]—

McNamara: It's too early to say, Mr. President. It missed most of the morning papers. But the late morning *Washington Post* has an article on the front page, and the headline is "U.S. Drops Rescuers in Congo." The article is straightforward but appears . . . entirely sensible.

President Johnson: What are the potential dangers as you see that—this action?

McNamara: Well, the danger is that—The dangers are severalfold: One, we can be accused of colonialism—linking up with a reactionary government in the Congo and indiscriminately killing the rebel people, who we believe will be supported by the eight-nation African conference. It looks almost certain as though [Jomo] Kenyatta and the governments of seven other African states will be supporting the rebels and, therefore, attacking us for supporting the government. I doubt, however, that in view of the rebel action in indiscriminately killing the hostages, there will be any strong public support in this country for that charge. I think we would have been in a worse position if we'd gone ahead and withheld the drop and then had the Vandewalle column approach the city, and the rebels would have acted, I suspect, in almost exactly the same fashion, except they would have had more time and killed more hostages. And then you would have been charged with withholding military assistance, which was close at hand, and as a result, accepting a large number of civilian deaths.

End of excerpt.

CITATION: Conversation WH6411-26-6470-6471, 24 November 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Draft Transcript, Presidential Recordings Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia.