

This week in history: December 6-12

5 December 2021

25 years ago: Fighting spreads in Zaire

On December 8, 1996, rebel troops seized control of two important towns in northeastern Zaire, cutting off government troops from their bases. This also increased the likelihood that Kisangani, the country's second largest city and the major river port on the Zaire (Congo) River, would fall. Troops of the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire captured Komanda and Mambasa, on the road that linked Kisangani and the city of Bunia, the last remaining government stronghold in the eastern region.

The rebel group, under the leadership of ethnic Tutsis, had the backing of both the Tutsi-led government of Rwanda and the government of Uganda. Since the offensive began the previous November, the Alliance had captured a huge section of eastern Zaire. Laurent Kabila, the group's leader, had set up a regional government based on Goma, on the Zaire-Rwanda border.

Press reports described the virtual decomposition of the Zairian armed forces, which did not fight the rebels but looted cities along the pathway and then fled the scene. One foreign correspondent in Kinshasa, the capital city, reported, "Indications are mounting that Africa's second largest country has begun to implode." On December 9, aides to Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seko, who was dying of cancer at his estate on the French Riviera, confirmed that he would not return to the country.

The disintegration of Mobutu's regime, which dominated central Africa for more than three decades after it was installed with CIA assistance in the 1960s, touched off an increasingly open struggle for influence in the region between France and the United States.

The US supplied surplus military equipment to Uganda, and Rwandan Vice President and Tutsi leader Paul Kagame visited Washington before the Ugandan-backed offensive began. While the imperialist powers were jockeying for domination of a region rich in natural resources, including copper, cobalt and diamonds, as many as 1 million refugees of the initial battles in eastern Zaire remained unaccounted for, and hundreds of thousands of ethnic Hutu refugees who returned to Rwanda lacked basic necessities.

50 years ago: Senate confirms Nixon Supreme Court nominees

On the week of December 6, 1971 the United States Senate approved two nominations to the Supreme Court selected by President Richard Nixon. Earlier in the fall two sitting justices Hugo Black and John Marshall Harlan II became ill and resigned from the court shortly before their deaths. The new nominations would be Nixon's third and fourth appointments to the court allowing him to have chosen nearly half of the nine total Supreme Court justices during his presidency.

The two justices, Lewis Powell and William Rehnquist, were chosen for their pro-business politics and arch-conservative understanding of the Constitution. Prior to their appointment to the court Powell had been a partner at a large corporate law firm in Virginia and served as the chairman of the Virginia Department of Education.

Powell had caught Nixon's attention for the Court nomination after he had authored a memorandum titled "Attack on the American Free Enterprise System." The document is an anti-communist diatribe calling for businesses to prepare a counterattack against left-wing protests, writing that the suppression of political dissent "is for businessmen to confront this problem as a primary responsibility of corporate management."

Similarly, Rehnquist had a long legal and political career prior to his Supreme Court appointment. In the early 1950s he served as a clerk for the Supreme Court under Justice Robert H. Jackson, before entering private law practice. Later he served as a legal adviser to Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign in 1964. Then after Nixon's election in 1968, he worked in the Justice Department as an Assistant Attorney General until his nomination to the court.

While Powell's nomination to the court was approved by the Senate with an overwhelming majority vote of 89-1, Rehnquist's Senate hearing was more contentious.

Most notably, a number of senators had raised objections to a statement Rehnquist authored while he had served at a Supreme Court clerk. The statement explained his belief that the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling was incorrect and that as he wrote, "I think *Plessy v. Ferguson* was right and should be reaffirmed." The latter was the 1898 court ruling upholding Jim Crow segregation.

Rehnquist attempted to distance himself from this statement, claiming that they expressed the views of Justice Jackson, not his own. Rehnquist's nomination to the court was also opposed by a number of organizations, including the AFL-CIO, the United Auto Workers and the NAACP. Regardless, his nomination to the court would also pass with a vote of 68-26.

The Nixon nominees to the court would play a major role in establishing the Supreme Court as a conservative bulwark against progressive legislation. In 1986 President Ronald Reagan would promote Rehnquist to the position of chief justice.

75 years ago: India heads towards violent partition

On December 6, 1946, a four-day conference in London came to a conclusion without any resolution to the issue of establishing a unified, independent India. Throughout the talks, hosted by British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, Jawaharlal Nehru of the Congress Party and Muslim League President Muhammad Ali Jinnah were at loggerheads over the prospective distribution of power within a new parliament and the weight of different regions in a national federation.

The location of the conference was notable. For centuries, British imperialism plundered the Indian subcontinent. Amid a wave of anti-colonial struggles at the end of World War II and confronting its declining position on the world stage, Britain moved towards granting nominal independence. At the same time, it promoted communal divisions, which also served as the political basis of the venal native bourgeoisie.

For much of 1946, Britain had overseen talks about the establishment of an independent government. A British cabinet mission early in the year had proposed a three-tier system of government, involving a central administration responsible for defense, foreign affairs, communications and currency, and substantial provincial governmental authority. The provinces were to be divided along ethno-communalist lines.

While the competing factions initially agreed to this, Jinnah and the Muslim League came to oppose it, asserting that they would be under the yoke of the Hindu ruling elite. In August, Jinnah called a "direct action day" against the plan, which resulted in violent communal clashes centered in Calcutta. These claimed up to 4,000 lives and left hundreds of thousands homeless.

The last-ditch talks in London failed to result in any agreement. On December 9, India's first national constituent assembly convened for the first time, three days after the London conference broke down. Of the 389-member body, the 76 Muslim League representatives boycotted the sittings. The fracturing would lead in 1947 to the violent partition of the Indian subcontinent, in a division along communal lines that

resulted in anywhere from 200,000 to 2 million deaths and the displacement of tens of millions.

In addition to advancing the interests of rival sections of the native bourgeoisie, the promotion of communalism served to divide the working class and prevent its emerging struggles from developing into a movement against capitalism. The Quit India movement, and a series of rebellions against British rule after World War II, had seen united struggles by Hindu, Muslim and other workers as well as Indian army personnel. Subsequently, however, leaders of the Hindu Congress Party and the Muslim League had joined together with the British in opposing strike movements of the working class, while whipping up the racist poison.

100 years ago: Anglo-Irish Treaty signed

On December 6, 1921, leaders of the Irish nationalist movement, Sinn Féin, including Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith, and representatives of the British government, including Prime Minister David Lloyd George, signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

The agreement ended the brutal Irish War of Independence and established the Irish Free State as a dominion within the British Empire. The country was divided along sectarian lines with the 26 predominantly Catholic southern counties belonging to the Free State and the 6 northern, majority Protestant counties remaining with the United Kingdom. The treaty provided for the withdrawal of most British forces from Ireland.

The British parliament approved the treaty on December 21, and the Irish nationalist Dáil (parliament) approved it on January 7, 1922, by a vote of 64 to 57, even though it was not the body specified in the treaty to approve it.

The treaty caused one of the great schisms in the Irish nationalist movement and had profound effects on Irish politics, social life and popular culture for the next century.

Its immediate result was a split in Sinn Féin between those who supported the Irish Free State and constituted its Provisional Government, and those who opposed it and held out for the unity of the 32 counties completely independent of the United Kingdom. The resulting divisions led to the Irish Civil War of 1922-23.



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