

PRESS RELEASE

65th Anniversary of the Assassination of Patrice Émery Lumumba
Procedural Review Hearing – Pre-Trial Chamber of the Brussels Court of First Instance,
20 January 2026

Sixty-five years after the assassination of Patrice Émery Lumumba, the first democratically elected Prime Minister of independent Congo, Étienne Davignon remains the last surviving indicted individual in this case. With the hearing that will decide whether the criminal trial will take place approaching on 20 January in Brussels, the Lumumba family asserts that this is likely the last opportunity for the Belgian justice system to *'give truth a chance'* and to rule on criminal responsibilities for the war crimes that led to the death of Patrice Lumumba on 17 January 1961. Refusing such judicial scrutiny would definitely entrench the impunity for major colonial crimes.

Brussels, 16 January 2026

Sixty-five years after the assassination of Patrice Émery Lumumba, the first democratically elected Prime Minister of independent Congo and iconic figure of the African independence movements, the Belgian justice system has been called upon to determine whether the criminal proceedings concerning the circumstances of his death — and those of his ministers Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito, executed on 17 January 1961 in Katanga — should proceed.

At this stage of the proceedings, former Belgian diplomat Étienne Davignon remains the sole defendant — out of eleven Belgian citizens first indicted — still living in this case. This fact confers particular significance upon the forthcoming hearing: it may constitute the final opportunity for a Belgian court to examine, under criminal law, the individual responsibilities related to the assassination of Lumumba.

On 20 January, the Pre-Trial Chamber (*Chambre du conseil*) of the Brussels Court of First Instance will hold a procedural review *in camera* hearing in the framework of the judicial investigation opened following the complaint filed in 2011 by François Lumumba, the eldest son of Patrice Lumumba. This hearing takes place at a highly

symbolic moment: the sixty-fifth anniversary of this triple political assassination, which for decades was surrounded by silence, denial and impunity.

On this occasion, approximately ten additional members of the Lumumba family, all direct descendants of Patrice Lumumba, will join François Lumumba as civil parties. This collective and transgenerational step embodies a definitive resolve: that justice ultimately adjudicates on facts that can be characterised solely as war crimes, along with the associated criminal responsibilities arising therefrom. This endeavour further signifies that the absence of judicial response persists over time and transcends generations.

"For nearly fifteen years, our family has pursued this judicial process with dignity and restraint. What is at stake today is neither wounded emotions nor a political reckoning with the past, but a matter of law and justice. We are speaking not only on behalf of our family, but on behalf of a generation that still believes that the law can be applied, even when crimes were committed by States and long concealed. We are asking the justice system to give truth a chance, so that responsibilities may finally be established."

— *Excerpt from the statement to be made by the Lumumba family in view of the hearing scheduled on 20 January 2026*

The work of the Parliamentary Investigation Commission, established in 2001, has already established the existence of moral responsibility on the part of Belgium in the events leading to the arrest, transfer and execution of Patrice Lumumba. The ongoing judicial proceedings seek to go beyond mere political or historical acknowledgment, to allow for an effective criminal examination, in line with the requirements of the rule of law.

Contrary to some arguments, the mere passage of time does not serve as a barrier to justice. When war crimes and State crimes are concealed by the very institutions responsible for preventing them, they explicitly necessitate a judicial response — albeit delayed, yet essential. For the first time, the murder of an African independence leader attributed to a former colonial power is being prosecuted criminally in court.

The hearing of 20 January 2026 will not yet address the guilt of Étienne Davignon. The court will act the end of the investigation and decide whether the case can be send to trial. Nevertheless, it constitutes a decisive step for the right of victims and their descendants to truth, justice and recognition, and for the ability of the justice system to confront Belgium's colonial past. The assassination of Patrice Lumumba not only tore a man away from his family but also deprived a nation of its democratically elected Prime Minister and newly independent Africa of one of its most prominent leaders, thereby permanently altering the course of history.

To commemorate this tragic anniversary and take stock of the hearing, a press conference will be held on 20 January 2026 at 2 p.m. at the Press Club Brussels Europe and online. Those wishing to attend this event are kindly requested to contact Marie-Laurence Hébert-Dolbec (mlhd@juscogens.be) and Louna Monaco (lm@juscogens.be) for further information.