

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE E-15WASHINGTON POST
22 November 1984

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CIA Helps Zaire Leader Crush Plot

No matter what you may read, the CIA doesn't always fumble the ball. Last month, President Mobutu Seso Seko of Zaire was able to crush a coup attempt after he was given a timely tip by the CIA.

What makes the successful squelching of the attempted coup particularly satisfying to the CIA is that it was Libya's Soviet-leaning dictator, Muammar Qaddafi, who was behind the plot. So the CIA helped protect the 19-year rule of a pro-Western African leader against the most virulent anti-American leader in all of Africa and the Arab world.

CIA sources told my associate Dale Van Atta that the Libyan egomaniac's ire was aroused against Mobutu for several reasons:

Qaddafi was furious at Mobutu for sending 2,000 troops into Chad last year to block a Libyan invasion. He also resented Mobutu's pro-Western stance in general. And Qaddafi has never forgiven Mobutu's decision to resume diplomatic relations with Israel in 1982.

Zaire, which has a negligible Moslem population, was the first black country to do so; it gave Israel an enormously important listening post in Africa.

Qaddafi was also ticked off at Mobutu for proposing last July to replace the Organization of African Unity, which the Libyan dictator hoped to use as a means to dominate the whole continent, with a league of black African states, which would have cut Qaddafi off at the Sahara.

The thwarted coup wasn't the first attempt Qaddafi had made on Mobutu. Last January, when a bomb exploded in luggage taken off a Soviet airliner

at the airport outside the Zairean capital of Kinshasa, Mobutu suggested that the Libyans had engineered the unsuccessful attack through their embassy in neighboring Congo.

Details on last month's plot against Mobutu are sketchy. One source said that Zairean military officers from Mobutu's home province of Equateur were behind it, and that they had Libyan backing. The plotters were reportedly unhappy over Mobutu's intervention in Chad and jealous of a civil police guard that had won the president's favor.

Whoever the Zairean conspirators were, and whatever their backing was, the plan was to seize Mobutu at the Kinshasa airport on his arrival from a visit to Western Europe early last month. Though one faction reportedly favored Mobutu's summary execution, most of the plotters wanted to send him into exile on the plane that brought him home.

But Mobutu was tipped off by the CIA and had his plane land at another airport. The conspirators learned about the tipoff to Mobutu when they stole a suitcase containing the secret plans for the plot from a hotel room in Brussels. The suitcase belonged to Mukundji Kasongo, president of Mobutu's parliament.

The CIA has had a long and highly supportive relationship with Mobutu since he first gained power in the early years of the former Belgian Congo's independence. It is probably no coincidence that Larry Devlin, the CIA station chief who helped Mobutu seize power in a bloodless coup 19 years ago, became the Zairean representative of the top American diamond broker when he retired from the CIA in 1974.