For 2 Experts Killed in Congo, U.N. Provided Little Training and No Protection

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/20/world/africa/congo-zaida-catalan-michael-j-sharp-united-nations-democratic-republic-of-congo.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=first-column-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news>

Zaida Catalán was on to something, and it was making her jumpy.

“Exciting development,” she scribbled in her diary in late January. “I can maybe nail this bastard. Damn!”

Weeks later, Ms. Catalán, a [United Nations](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/u/united_nations/index.html?inline=nyt-org) investigator with little training and no safety equipment or even health insurance, headed into a remote area teeming with militia fighters to find the culprits behind a [massacre](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/17/world/africa/democratic-republic-congo-massacre-video-.html) in the [Democratic Republic of Congo](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/congothedemocraticrepublicof/index.html?inline=nyt-geo).

A grainy cellphone video shows what happened next: A cluster of men with rifles and red bandannas lead Ms. Catalán, a 36-year-old Swedish-Chilean, into a grove with her American colleague, Michael J. Sharp, 34. The two investigators are barefoot.

Mr. Sharp starts arguing. He and Ms. Catalán are forced onto the ground. Suddenly, shots are fired, hitting Mr. Sharp first. Ms. Catalán screams and tries to run for cover. She is shot twice.

Their bodies were discovered weeks later in a shallow grave, laid out carefully, side by side, in opposite directions. Ms. Catalán had been decapitated. Her head had been taken.

Their deaths raise [tough questions](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/04/world/africa/04congo.html) about the United Nations and its work in the most dangerous places in the world. Almost two months passed before the United Nations even assembled a panel to look into what went wrong. The United Nations Security Council could go further and order a more formal investigation, but more than two months after the murders, it has taken no steps in that direction.

Instead, it has left the investigation to Congo, a nation where violence, [corruption and impunity](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/17/world/africa/congo-joseph-kabila-corruption.html) are so widespread that the United Nations has had to [spend billions](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/28/world/africa/28congo.html) of dollars over the years in a failed effort to bring peace and stability. Indeed, a big focus of Ms. Catalán and her colleagues was whether the Congolese government played a role in the massacre and broader chaos she was investigating.

“The U.N. needs to take ownership,” said Akshaya Kumar, a deputy director at Human Rights Watch. She added that the Congolese authorities, who are implicated in the region’s conflict, were in no position to carry out a credible investigation.

The killings have also stirred a sharp debate over the United Nations’ responsibility to prepare and protect the people it hires to investigate wrongdoing around the world. Ms. Catalán and Mr. Sharp belonged to a panel of six experts authorized by the Security Council to investigate rapes, massacres and the exploitation of Congo’s vast natural resources.

They traveled without United Nations escorts, often going into areas that are no-go zones for United Nations employees. In this case, the two hired three motorcycle taxis and a Congolese interpreter to ferry them into the countryside. Their Congolese companions are still missing. There is no evidence that they have been killed.

As independent contractors, the investigators had no health insurance and received little training on how to operate in hostile environments. They were bound by the United Nations’ security rules; don’t travel on motorcycle taxis was one.

But former investigators say United Nations officials know full well the risks that experts routinely take to do their jobs. At least two said they had asked for electronic devices to track their locations and send distress signals, in case of emergencies exactly like this. The United Nations, through a spokesman, said it was not “a feasible requirement” to provide them.

“They were more looking at protecting themselves than protecting us,” said Daniel Fahey, who served on the Congo panel in 2013 and 2014. “Everyone loved our analyses. But no one really asked us: ‘How do you guys do this? What do you need?’”

Frans Barnard, a former British Army officer who served on the Congo panel in 2014, said he had been concerned enough to buy his own location tracker.

“In my world, duty of care means if we ask you to do something, we give you the training and the equipment to do that,” Mr. Barnard said.

Asked whether the United Nations had done enough to prepare and protect the experts, José Luis Díaz, a spokesman, said the organization was asking itself the same question.

“This is why the U.N. is looking at the whole sequence of events in the disappearance and murder of our colleagues,” he said in an email. “We want to assess whether things worked as they should, and if what we have in place is adequate or robust enough.”

Congo has a long history of conflict and suffering. Foreign powers, successive leaders and an alphabet soup of rebel groups have all pillaged its rich natural resources. The country is the focus of the most expensive peacekeeping operation in the world. But the mission, called Monusco, has often been criticized for turning a blind eye to human rights abuses committed by government forces and rebels alike.

Ms. Catalán, a former Green Party activist in Sweden who had been working as a United Nations expert for less than a year, quickly got sucked into an extraordinarily dangerous world that she was woefully unprepared for, where the line between murderous rebels and corrupt politicians often blurs.

She worked assiduously to untangle a murky web of local politicians, rebel leaders and government ministers, trying to pin down perpetrators so that the Security Council could impose sanctions on them. Her tools often boiled down to a pen that doubled as a recorder, and a determined line of inquiry that ended up putting her life in danger.

It is still unclear who ordered the murders of the experts. The Congolese government said it had released the cellphone video to show that militia fighters, not its soldiers, were responsible. In April, the government announced the arrests of two men. One escaped. Then, on Saturday, the Congolese said they knew who had ordered the killings and where Ms. Catalán’s head was, but gave no further details.

But according to documents kept on Ms. Catalán’s computer and to others familiar with the case, she had been scrutinizing a government minister, Clément Kanku, for his possible role in inciting violence in the Congolese region of Kasai last year.

Mr. Kanku, the minister of development until he was fired this month, had close links to the militia fighters in the area; he had been brought into President Joseph Kabila’s coalition government last year to bring the rebels to heel.

Ms. Catalán kept 130 files in a folder on her computer under Mr. Kanku’s name. Among them was a recorded phone conversation in which he seems to discuss setting fire to a town in the region, Tshimbulu, with a subordinate. They talk about a successful jailbreak, targeted assassinations of a colonel and other officials, and general mayhem.

“We burnt Tshimbulu,” the subordinate is heard saying.

“It’s good that we burn everything; that is good news,” Mr. Kanku replies.

“The colonel is in his house, and we’re burning down the house so he burns to death,” the subordinate says.

Mr. Kanku asks: “Did you kill the colonel’s bodyguards?”

“Yes, we beat his bodyguards on the head with our batons,” the subordinate responds.

Though it was unclear how she had obtained it, Ms. Catalán had the recording in her possession in January, according to people familiar with her work, the same month she wrote in her diary about the big breakthrough. She had also texted Mr. Sharp, her colleague in Congo: “I have big stuff going on.”

People familiar with the case said Mr. Kanku had known she had the audio file. In fact, she had told Mr. Kanku that she had it, they said, and was scheduled to discuss the matter with him after her trip into the bush.

When contacted by The New York Times, Mr. Kanku initially denied, then confirmed, that he had been in contact with the experts.

“I talked with the man; the woman, I didn’t talk to her.” When pressed, he replied: “I think I also spoke with the woman, but I’m not sure because many people call me.”

“Listen, where are you? Can I see you?” he continued, sounding nervous. “I can’t talk right now. I’ll call you after.” Mr. Kanku abruptly hung up without addressing the contents of the tape. He did not call back or respond to multiple calls after that.

It was Ms. Catalán’s sister, Elizabeth, who first raised the alarm that the United Nations investigators were in trouble.

Late in the afternoon on March 12, she received an unnerving call from Ms. Catalán’s cellphone.

“I couldn’t hear her voice,” she said in their family’s home in Sweden. “I just heard lots of men talking in the background, not just a few but many, a group of men talking.”

Sensing something wrong, the family frantically reached out to Ms. Catalán’s colleagues in the United Nations.

The United Nations said peacekeepers “sprang into action from the very start,” with troops and helicopters deployed the next morning, according to Mr. Díaz, the spokesman.

The few peacekeepers stationed nearby began searching by road and air. But it took four days to deploy more United Nations forces from other parts of the country and begin a robust search, according to the commander of Monusco’s Uruguayan forces, Col. Luis Mangini.

It took a full two weeks to find the bodies.

The autopsy concluded little. Death by multiple injuries, it said. Ms. Catalán’s second autopsy report, conducted by a private Ugandan pathology service, said the body, initially examined by the Congolese authorities, “had neither blood staining, mud nor soiling of any sort, suggesting that the body had been washed clean.”

Families and friends of Ms. Catalán said they were unaware of just how dangerous her job was, even compared with her earlier assignments. Ms. Catalán previously worked for the European Union, educating local police officers in Afghanistan, Congo and the [Palestinian](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/p/palestinians/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) territories on gender-based violence. She once confided to a friend about the ad hoc nature of her United Nations assignment. It was, she said, like living on the edge.

In December, during a visit home for Christmas, Ms. Catalán recounted a frightening episode in which she had interviewed a rebel leader accused of committing atrocities. “I barely made it out of that room alive,” Elizabeth, her sister, recalled her saying.

The risks began to take a toll on her.

A week before her death, she had a disturbing premonition: “My body will be carried out of the jungle,” she confided to a friend.

Now, relatives, colleagues and friends are frustrated at the handling of the killings. The Swedish authorities say they are looking into the deaths, but family members are calling on the United Nations to conduct a credible, independent investigation as well.

 “What we hope for now is an independent international criminal investigation,” said Mr. Sharp’s father, John. “We can’t depend on the Congolese government to do it.”