

A giant has fallen: Memories of working with Sergio Vieira de Mello

On 19 August 2003, we were all woken from our summer inertia by news of the bombing of the UN building in Baghdad and the death of over 20 staff, among them UN Special Representative Sergio Vieira de Mello.

Initially, Sergio seemed to be the only one named, although all the fallen colleagues were trying to serve fellow human beings in a dangerous context. We well knew the enormous risks for international and local staff in crisis response work. Just a few weeks before, a colleague on a project in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and his family had been savagely attacked by a band of machete-wielding militia while at home asleep. But nothing prepared us for the shock of Baghdad.

Donato: In November 1997, Sergio was the UN Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees. The Department of Humanitarian Affairs' magazine was preparing an issue on the theme "Missions in Peril". As editor-in-chief, I called Sergio for an article. His immediate response was a piece entitled "Who cares for the carers?" In that article, which now sadly looks like something between a prophecy and a testament, he wrote that "working in insecure environments has almost become a norm. Anything can happen. There are no clear dividing lines between victims and aggressors, combatants and non-combatants". Even more tellingly, he went on: "The apparent indifference towards the security of humanitarian personnel is striking... Governments are not averse to letting humanitarian staff go where they do not dare send their troops, who are invariably better equipped, better trained and better protected... Those responsible for killing or wounding humanitarian staff are almost never brought to justice... In the absence of a more active support from governments, the question arises how far should humanitarian workers go? Should those agencies begin to refuse to intervene in the absence of adequate security conditions? What would the consequence of such a stance be?" This was not a rhetorical question for Sergio, who had a precise answer: "With the departure of UN staff, in the midst of the darkness of a war, a beacon of hope is extinguished for many. Each withdrawal reflects not only on those directly responsible for the attacks, but also on the international community as a whole. It reflects a moral retreat. It is indicative of a rising threshold of atrocities the international community are willing to countenance. Governments have it within their means to reverse this trend and to diminish the risk we are exposed to. It is time they acted." Sergio was not prepared for a moral retreat, or indeed any other sort. I had a personal demonstration of his courage and determination years before, in October 1994 when he was in charge of civil affairs for the UN mission in the former Yugoslavia. Assigned to the International Criminal Tribunal (ICTY), I was dispatched to Zagreb during the summer of that year to prepare under Sergio's supervision the basis for possible cooperation agreements with the national authorities concerned. He firmly believed that bringing to justice those responsible for war crimes, genocide and other atrocities was an essential step towards peace and reconciliation. When Richard Goldstone, the ICTY Prosecutor, made his first visit to Croatia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sergio used all his negotiating skills to open channels of communication at the highest level. He also managed to persuade Bosnian Serb and Muslim fighters that they had to allow the visit of Goldstone (the man who was going to indict them for war crimes) to a besieged Sarajevo during one of the most tragic moments of that protracted war.

The visit coincided with atrocities being committed on both sides. At the beginning of October, the tension was at its peak and the airport of Sarajevo (the main lifeline for those under siege) was closed for two weeks in retaliation for the first NATO military strikes. Sergio had arranged for two helicopters to bring the ICTY Prosecutor and his group of four accompanying officers to Kiseljak, not far from Sarajevo. A fog so thick that the pilots were compelled to fly back to Split once we were already over Kiseljak nullified the first attempt. But Sergio did not give up. I was standing next to him when he calmly started negotiating over the radio a new safe air corridor for us to land directly in Sarajevo.

We took off again from Split. Navigating a sea of clouds and fog, we could distinguish nothing outside the cockpit. The pilots obviously had the same problem and for one long hour we felt lost in a surreal atmosphere where the noise of the propellers was the only reminder of the fact that we were in the air. Bouncing up and down, I looked at Sergio who was probably also asking himself if we would make it. He jotted down something on a piece of paper and passed it to me. It said: "We are looking for a hole in

the clouds.” We finally found the hole and landed in Sarajevo, virtually reopening that tarmac to air traffic.

Sergio had managed to persuade fighters on the hills around Sarajevo not to shoot us down, and they kept their promise. Those flying with him have yet to thank him for that safe passage... now that he is looking through the clouds.

Eugenia: I spent two weeks with Sergio in May 1999, as a member of the UN assessment mission he led to Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro at the height of the NATO offensive against Yugoslav government atrocities in Kosovo. Sergio had a presence, extraordinary intellect, stamina and bravery which made some of us feel almost unfit for the task. Our daily 18 hours’ work, including intellectual brainstorming, long road journeys in unsafe locations, extensive interviews, late meals, delicate negotiations with various groups, and writing reports into the small hours under the constant noise of bombs falling nearby, was sapping our energies just a few days into the mission. In contrast, Sergio never seemed tired but always alert, friendly and polite to all the people we met even when their hidden obnoxious agendas were apparent. I could never keep pace with his walking. I later remarked on this to a colleague, who pointed out that Sergio regularly jogged.

He had a rigorous approach to gathering the information for which the Security Council had dispatched our mission. Sometimes he would leave the team behind when he judged the location to be very unsafe and go alone with his skeletal personal security. I found this selflessness a testimony to not only his bravery but his total dedication to his work. I came to think of my participation in the Kosovo mission as a privilege, since it provided me with the opportunity to learn from a consummate master of the trade. So great was his passion for crisis response work that he took a lot of risks at the peril of his life. Immediately after the report had been submitted to the Security Council, he wrote to each member of the mission, adding a personal note in his own handwriting. He had none of the pomposity often seen in people of his stature. After Kosovo, I had a few very brief encounters, such as at donor meetings on East Timor and last December at a Consolidated Appeals launch on Somalia, Sudan and DRC. What struck me at these events was his towering intellect and the global admiration and respect he commanded.

The incident in Baghdad, while extreme, is a wake-up call for the UN as a whole to revisit its crisis response interventions, especially during conflicts, and re-examine the approaches adopted, the extent of risks that staff should be subjected to, and how to strengthen the protection of staff – international and local. When those of us in crisis work go to crisis countries, we have a false sense of security that the banner of the UN will protect us from harm, as it testifies to our neutral stance. This incident has shaken us out of our delusion. On 26 August 2003, the UN Security Council passed a resolution condemning attacks against UN personnel and equating them with crimes against humanity. The text is a compromise; not exactly what humanitarian workers and international civil servants would have wished. Despite the enormity of these crimes, the International Criminal Court has not been called in to judge them; the national jurisdiction of each member State will solely be responsible. Yet for too long, too many UN officers working in all corners of the world in vital missions paid with their lives the price exacted by warlords and criminal regimes. It took many decades to reach agreement on a principle which should have been affirmed long ago, before the sacrifice of so many enthusiastic peacekeepers and aid workers, before the martyrdom of a modern symbol of heroism. So far, the latest UN resolution is perhaps the most relevant tribute to Sergio Vieira de Mello, who more than anybody else lived his life through the UN, with his mission clear in his mind and no doubts about his own engagement. But he was constantly preoccupied by the high risks to which UN personnel are exposed and stated many times that “humanitarian agencies should not be left to act alone without protection in a conflict environment”.

For us, in life or in death, Sergio will forever be a mentor.

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