
Sérgio Vieira de Mello

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Sérgio Vieira de Mello, the UN's top man in Iraq, died on August 19th, aged 55

ALL that is necessary for evil to triumph, said the Irish philosopher Edmund Burke, is for good men to do nothing. Sérgio Vieira de Mello lived as if he had taken this dictum to heart. Few other people have devoted such boundless energy to so many good causes. The last of these, and the one which was to cost him his life, was the struggle to rebuild Iraq, where he was the United Nations secretary-general's special envoy.

In the month before he was murdered, by an unknown bomber in Baghdad, he visited six neighbouring countries—Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Syria—to try to persuade their rulers to support Iraq's transition to democracy. The rulers were reluctant, because America's occupation of Iraq is so unpopular with other Arabs, and because some of them fear that a functioning democracy on their doorstep would pose a threat, by example, to their own authoritarian regimes. Mr Vieira de Mello was not discouraged, however. He was not the type.

He was, he said, a diplomat who “liked to get his boots dirty from time to time”. In a career with the UN that lasted for three decades, he was posted to a variety of tough spots. He was in Bangladesh when it broke bloodily away from Pakistan, in Cyprus after Turkey invaded, in Mozambique during its civil war, in Peru under military rule and in Lebanon when Israeli tanks rumbled across the border. He occasionally quipped that he had built his career by treading on minefields—sometimes literally, as when he helped organise de-mining in Cambodia.

Last year, he was promoted to be high commissioner for human rights, but he was best known for his work in shattered war zones. He was briefly the UN's chief envoy to Kosovo, after NATO bombers drove the Serbian army out of the former Yugoslavian province in 1999. Then he was sent to East Timor, an Indonesian colony in the last phase of its struggle for independence. As the Indonesian troops left, they killed and burned in the hope of crippling the young state. Mr Vieira de Mello's job was to clean up the mess, and to guide East Timor to its first democratic elections.

Kofi Annan, the UN secretary-general and Mr Vieira de Mello's mentor, packed him off with the words: “I want you to be my little Nelson Mandela.” The parallel was not exact; Mr Vieira de Mello did not spend 27 years in jail. But like Mr Mandela, he helped to create a democratic state from the rubble of an oppressive one, and then, when he was no longer needed, made a graceful withdrawal from the scene.

His experiences in Kosovo and East Timor made him an obvious choice to represent the UN in Iraq. He agreed to go for four months, after which he planned to return to

his human-rights duties. Baghdad, he told *O Estado de S. Paulo*, a Brazilian daily, in his last interview, was not his riskiest assignment. "I don't feel in danger as I did in other places where I was working for the UN. I don't feel a climate of hostility."

A life of bustle and charm

Sérgio Vieira de Mello was born on March 15th 1948, in Rio de Janeiro. He left his beautiful home city when he was 17, to study philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris. While he was there, the Brazilian embassy in Paris kept a file on him, perhaps because of his student activism, and perhaps because he was the son of an ambassador who had been banned from public service by Brazil's military government in the 1960s, for alleged leftist sympathies.

Understandably, given such a background, he never wanted to become a Brazilian diplomat, but he was instantly recognisable as a certain kind of Brazilian abroad. It wasn't just the silver hair, though that is as Brazilian as *caipirinha* (a cocktail made with cane liquor). It was the combination of easy charm, a worldly sophistication, a sharp mind and a pragmatic approach to solving problems.

As a Brazilian, he had a keen sense of the injured pride that can be felt by peoples who are less fortunate than Americans or western Europeans. In Mr Vieira de Mello's interview with *O Estado de S. Paulo* he said: "This must be one of the most humiliating periods in history [for Iraqis]. Who would like to see their country occupied? I would not like to see foreign tanks in Copacabana."

He said that Iraqis admired Brazil, for reasons he did not wholly understand, though it had something to do with football, and that this helped him a lot in his work. Because Iraq is largely under American control, however, he never had the free hand he had enjoyed in East Timor, where he had had carte blanche to name ministers and set up institutions such as the parliament and central bank.

In Iraq, his role was more in the background, urging American and British administrators to do more to restore electricity and water supplies, and coaxing outsiders to help more or, at least, hinder less. He argued that the occupying powers' top priority should be to speed up the establishment of an Iraqi police force. "No foreigner," he said, "can impose security."

Sadly, he was right. On August 19th, a yellow cement truck exploded outside the UN's headquarters in Baghdad. At least 20 people were killed. Mr Vieira de Mello lay trapped, alive, in the rubble for several hours before he, too, died. Evil triumphed, at least temporarily.