



Sergio Vieira de Mello Foundation

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Protecting the People --- Tracing the Footprints of Sergio Vieira de Mello ---

Sadako Ogata Geneva, 12 March 2009

It is a privilege to deliver the second memorial lecture dedicated to our close and esteemed colleague, Sergio, in the presence of so many friends and collaborators. I wish to congratulate the organization of the Sergio Vieira de Mello Foundation which has the purpose of carrying on the mission that Sergio had taken on himself. And yet, as I start attempting to trace his footprints, I cannot suppress my deep sense of anger. Sergio Vieira de Mello, the Secretary General's Special Envoy to Iraq, should not have been the victim of the massive truck bomb explosion. I would also like to offer my tribute to the other victims, over twenty UN staff. Sergio's Chief of Staff, Nadia Younes was an outstanding public information and communications officer and my good friend. I would like to pay tribute to Arthur Helton, a New York lawyer and human rights activist with an exclusive focus on refugee protection. He had been scheduled to meet Sergio, and was coming to his office.

Let me now turn to Sergio. In the last e-mail to me dated 28 July, Sergio described the situation in Baghdad as "undoubtedly a very peculiar, bizarre and disconcerting situation the Iraqis, the coalition and indeed ourselves find in." He did not think there existed a precedent in the post World War II era, nor even in the League of Nations days. To him the challenge was "to carve a central role for the UN in these unique circumstances, without antagonizing the US... while at the same time satisfying the Iraqi public opinion that we are taking their interests to heart, and the broader, concentric neighbors /Arab /Muslim /nonaligned constituencies that we are not stooges of what they perceive as a grand US plan of world domination starting right here in Iraq." He considered his task to be "one hell of a challenge."

In mapping out what seemed like an impossible course of action, he developed a genuine sense of respect for the Iraqi people. Prior to the e-mail that I have just referred to, Sergio had delivered on 22 July what was to be his last report to the Security Council. In it he described his visit to the ancient city of Babel-Babylon where he was genuinely awe struck by the Iraqi contribution to what he described as the "collective civilization of mankind." He came to appreciate the source of the pride of the Iraqi people, and felt that they had been deeply hurt by the tragedies of recent years.

Upon arriving in Iraq in the beginning of June, Sergio traveled around the country, speaking with a wide range of Iraqis --- politicians, civil society leaders, lawyers, spiritual leaders, doctors, journalists, artists etc. He believed that he should speak with as many Iraqis as possible to find out what they wanted and how he might assist them in order to realize their aspirations. From the preliminary discussions, he felt that the Iraqis wanted "to see themselves back at the helm of their country." They wanted security, rule of law, restoration of basic services etc, and above all the establishment of "permanent, Iraqi representatives and

credible institutions that operate in their service.” Sergio believed that the mission of the United Nations was to help Iraq restore its sovereignty and return to the community of nations.

The message that Sergio stressed in his report to the Security Council was the evolving role of the United Nations. The United Nations can neither replace nor take over the Coalition Provisional Authority or Iraq’s Governing Council. To him, the particular function of the United Nations would evolve as stability returns to the country, the occupation ends and economic and social development needs become more apparent. In these varying phases, he felt that the United Nations owed “a debt to the people of Iraq that can be best honored” by supporting the rehabilitation of their country.

Nearly six years after his death, and with the change in the United States administration, the Iraqi situation seems to be moving in the direction that Sergio had aspired and foreseen. Yet Sergio would probably warn us that further commitments and action would be necessary to fully pay back our debt to the Iraqi people.

If leading the UN Iraq operation came at the culmination of Sergio’s career, there were many other missions that underscored his basic commitment to work for the people. Sergio had started his international career with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees when he was twenty-one. He served in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. His commitment was not simply to relieve them from their suffering, but to search for solutions that would alleviate them from their plight as refugees, the displaced and deprived. He would pursue all kinds of solutions to solve their plight. Sergio became the provider of all kinds of solutions.

One of his early achievements concerned the plight of Indochina refugees. A massive exodus from Vietnam followed the collapse of the Saigon regime in 1975. Many crossed the seas of South East Asia and became known as the “boat people.” At best they were given temporary stay in the region but had to be resettled in the West under international burden-sharing arrangements. However, several years later, another sudden and massive “boat people” departure started to take place from Vietnam though no significant deterioration of political and human rights situation could be observed. Sergio, as Director in the Regional Bureau for Asia and Oceania of UNHCR, came up with a program known as the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA). The program combined several options. First, resettlement for those qualified as refugees. Second, return to Vietnam for those unqualified but with assurances that they would not be prosecuted. Third, widely open access to legal emigration. On top of these measures, a “mass information campaign” was launched in Vietnam in order to make people aware of the variety of options that they were given, in order to prevent them from embarking on dangerous journeys abroad. The “CPA” stood as the first model for addressing mixed movements of people, a trend that subsequently became prevalent not only in Southeast Asia but also in many other parts of the world.

The repatriation of Cambodian refugees, the victims of KHMER Rouge atrocities, was led by Sergio, and became another milestone operation that introduced many new approaches. Between March 1992 and April 1993, following the conclusion of the Paris Peace Accords, a massive repatriation took place of Cambodians who had spent between 10 to 14 years in refugee camps in Thailand and other countries in Southeast Asia. The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was tasked to oversee the restoration of peace and rehabilitation of Cambodia, and UNHCR was to lead the repatriation of more than 365,000 refugees. Sergio was given the responsibility to head the operation.

I recall vividly and even with some pleasure the Cambodian repatriation exercise. Sergio resorted to all possible means of transport even the usage of old freight trains. The so-called Sisiphon Express, made 71 journeys between Sisiphon and Phnom `Penh and carried back 90,000 refugees. In accordance with the Paris Peace Accords, the refugees were free to return to wherever they chose. Sergio sought my agreement to travel through the Khmer Rouge dominated areas in order to make sure of their safety upon return. I was a bit concerned but decided to agree to his proposal. Sergio was genuinely concerned for the safety of the returnees to still Khmer Rouge dominated areas. He wanted to test the grounds himself, through talking to the leaders and the people. At the end, he succeeded in getting all the refugees back home in time to take part in UN led elections.

Another challenge that UNHCR had to tackle was mine clearance in areas receiving large number of returnees. Sergio first commissioned the service of a French agency called “Spot Image” to carry out satellite surveys of mine infested territory. I recall us poring over a mine map on the floor of our Bangkok hotel to work out the refugee return routes. As the seriousness of the mine problem became more clearly identified, Sergio decided to confront the challenge. He established a national agency against landmines, and he assumed the interim role of director of the “Cambodian Mine Action Center.

In a sense, a culmination of Sergio’s activities in Asia came with his appointment to lead the United Nations Transitional Administration (UNTAET) in East Timor. From 1999 until 2002, the United Nations governed East Timor, amidst continuing tension and violence between those favoring independence and the pro-Indonesian militias. I personally visited West Timor to help UNHCR protect and assist the 250,000 refugees who had fled from the East. The atmosphere was violent, and UNHCR would lose three precious staff who were attacked by those who resented the evolving situation. In East Timor, Sergio had to put together a UN team to establish a Timor administration, while confronting the militia and moving as fast as possible to enable the Timorese to gain control of their lives. The living conditions for the UNTAET team were harsh, as they found themselves in a totally destroyed city and had to accommodate themselves in a boat, which became known as “Hotel Olympia.” Sergio traveled to the districts, talked to the people and even learned the local language known as Tetum. Apparently he practiced to ensure his correct pronunciation. People appreciated his efforts and were reported to have addressed him as “professor.”

As head of a UN administration, Sergio’s mission was to implement the mandates given by the Security Council. In his reports to the Council, he chose his words carefully to prove that he was faithfully following his given mandate. Yet, he also made sure to push through his own points. While in Timor, he received a stream of high level visitors especially from directly interested governments such as Australia, Indonesia, Portugal, from troop contributing countries as well as interested reporters and NGOs. A few years later, I had the chance to meet President Yudhoyono of Indonesia, then serving as Coordination Minister. He expressed his deepest appreciation for the role played by Sergio in extremely trying circumstances. Coming from the leader who had to work out a peaceful process of ceding East Timor against all internal odds, I took his words as genuine appreciation for the negotiating capacity of Sergio, and recognition of his just and fair position.

In tracing the steps of Sergio, I have referred mainly to his role in Asia. Sergio somehow seemed to love Asia, and his accomplishments in the region were indeed significant. However, his footsteps were indeed global. He started his early career in Africa which at the time had been undergoing liberation wars and early state building activities. First he was posted in Sudan where he spent most of the time in the field office in Juba, the capital of southern Sudan, where UNHCR dealt with the rehabilitation of the town and carried out assistance to returnees. He was then posted to Mozambique to work mainly on the reintegration of returning refugees from Tanzania and internally displaced persons. Later, he had to deal with the trying experience of repatriating the Rwandan genocide victims and perpetrators who had scattered in the then Zaire (today’s Democratic Republic of Congo) and Tanzania. In Latin America, he worked for refugees who were victimized by the military dictatorships in Chile and Argentina and needed protection and assistance in neighboring countries. Sergio’s direct exposures to the sufferings of a vast number of ordinary people conditioned his basic attitude of sympathy towards the victims of civil wars and power struggles.

Another experience that Sergio acquired through his diversified career path, was his exposure to UN peacekeeping operations. His role in the repatriation of Cambodian refugees has been already referred to in my earlier description of the UNTAC operation. Having been charged with the protection of refugees frequently in conflict situations, UNHCR recognized the important role played by the military or police, if law and order were to be maintained, or humanitarian operations were to be sustained. UN peace-keeping operations had proved particularly relevant in carrying out UNHCR’s missions. Sergio was first exposed directly to UN peace-keeping in 1981, when he was seconded to the United Nations Interim Force in Southern Lebanon (UNIFIL) as a political officer. He contributed to the operation through acting as liaison

between the local administration or bringing the humanitarian needs of the population to the attention of the military.

Later in 1993, Sergio became the political director of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in Bosnia, perhaps the least fulfilling assignment that he received. In the Balkans, following the breakup of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, UNHCR was given the lead humanitarian role to protect and bring relief to some 2.7 million victims. In terms of the scale of operations, complexity of conflicting interests and the viciousness of the means employed --- ethnic cleansing ---, it was the most dire experience that UNHCR had ever undergone. Sergio's role was an unusual one. He was in fact asked by the UN headquarters to help the military leaders of UNPROFOR who had felt inadequately understood. As the UNPROFOR commander General Briquemont recalled, there was a chasm of misunderstanding between the military leaders of UNPROFOR and the political leaders in the UN headquarters and European capitals. Even with the skill and dedication of Sergio, he could give UNPROFOR leaders a sense of solace, but could not improve the fundamental situation. In the end, two generals resigned. UNPROFOR failed to carry out its mission because quote, "there was no peace agreement to enforce."

Before undertaking the responsibility of the Secretary General's Special Representative to Iraq, Sergio had been appointed as High Commissioner for Human Rights, in October 2002. It was a somewhat unfamiliar kind of responsibility for Sergio, and I had the feeling that he was quite determined to make a good try. This was the reason why he was keen to leave Iraq after completing his four months assignment, and take up his new life and challenge.

Having meandered through the footprints of Sergio, I should conclude my lecture by trying to identify his central attributes. Some have referred to Sergio as A skillful diplomat. Others have identified him as a superb intellectual. Some others have referred to him as a "principled pragmatist." I would agree with all these identifications, but would wish to characterize him simply as an outstanding "field worker."

In some circles in UNHCR, "a field worker" stands as the highest tribute to qualified colleagues. They are the ones who work closely with refugees, and who care for real people in real suffering. Throughout his brilliant and varied career, Sergio always focused on the people, looked closely into the causes of their suffering and mobilized all resources to meet their needs. UNHCR's mandate is the protection of people. Sergio dedicated his life to those who were in fateful situations. They were the "boat people," the "returning refugees," those "caught in mine fields," or those "under foreign occupation." Through out his career, Sergio remained the ultimate "field worker," who always stayed close to the people.