

A Giant Has Fallen: *Sergio Vieira de Mello!*

With all the moving tributes written and eloquently delivered about Sergio Vieira de Mello since last week, by his closest friends and colleagues, we - Eugenia Date-Bah and Donato Kiniger-Passigli - have been wondering whether those of us who had only brief encounters with him have any thing to add. However, since we saw him as a great mentor for our crisis response work, we have been moved to at least share some of our impressions of this great man.

On 19 August 2003, many of us were woken out of our summer inertia by the news of the tragic bombing of the UN building in Baghdad and, more importantly the death of over 20 of the staff including the UN Special Representative, Sergio Vieira de Mello. Our thoughts immediately went to the ILO team that had planned an exploratory mission to Iraq in August. Eugenia's communication to one of them before leaving for vacation was "please listen to your wife" because she had earlier learnt that his wife did not want him to go on that mission. We were thus a bit relieved to learn later that, although that mission took place, it ended almost one week before the bomb blast.

Our thoughts then focused fully on Sergio who seemed (from the little information available initially) to be the only one whose name had then been given among the fallen UN colleagues who are all important, trying to make a useful contribution to fellow human beings in a dangerous context. We were very conversant with the enormous risks for UN, other staff and locals in crisis response work which we ourselves and other UN and non-UN colleagues in crisis work have experienced or witnessed. For example, just a few weeks before, a colleague on a project in the Democratic Republic of Congo and his family had been savagely attacked by a band of machete-wielding militia as they slept at home and apart from the severe wounds inflicted on them, a daughter had also been brutally raped by the group in front of their very eyes. But one can say that our experiences pale beside last week's tragic event in Baghdad.

In November 1997, Sergio (as we all call him) was the UN Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees and was thrilled by the theme chosen in the Department of Humanitarian Affairs for its monographic magazine, in the December issue. The theme was: "Missions in Peril". I, Donato, was then the editor-in-chief of that magazine and called Sergio who immediately adhered to the request for an article. He wrote a piece, entitled "**Who cares for the carers?**" Highlights of the article, which now sadly appears something in-between a prophecy and a testament, say 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**". The most telling excerpts of that article (which should probably be re-printed in full to understand unequivocally Sergio's thoughts and proposals), read as follows:

".... The authorities of the country concerned have the primary responsibility for ensuring the security of humanitarian personnel. ...Governments, however, are often unable or unwilling to assume those tasks...Humanitarian space exists as long as all parties to the conflict respect basic humanitarian principles: the neutral, impartial nature of humanitarian action and the inviolability of the symbols used by the agencies concerned, Red Cross, UN or other. Where the fighting is not carried out by trained soldiers but – as is increasingly the case- by

a mixture of armed civilians, mercenaries, brigands and bandits...the rationale of humanitarian principles is not understood, let alone respected. Impartiality in such conflicts can become an academic concept. It is very hard to be perceived as impartial when the victims for whom one is intervening are considered part of the enemy, and when denying them assistance is a key military objective. Humanitarian agencies are viewed as co-operating with or assisting a party to the conflict. They become legitimate targets: there is no humanitarian space.....

The apparent indifference towards the security of humanitarian personnel is striking. In 1994, a UN convention was adopted – which only limited number of States have ratified- on the safety and security of UN and associated personnel. Despite lobbying of the humanitarian agencies, it failed to explicitly address the safety of civilian humanitarian staff. 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.....At present impunity prevails. Those responsible for killing or wounding humanitarian staff are almost never brought to justice. A variety of measures should be pursued to enhance accountability. As a first step, States should investigate any crimes committed against humanitarian personnel and prosecute persons responsible for such a crimes..... 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 rhetoric question for Sergio who had a precise answer to it: "... 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 any sort of retreats. 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. I was assigned to the International Criminal Tribunal (ICTY) and was dispatched to Zagreb during the summer of that year to prepare with Sergio's assistance and supervision the basis for possible cooperation agreements between the newly established ICTY and the national authorities concerned. Sergio firmly believed that international justice, and 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 offered his good offices and used all his negotiation efforts to open channels of communication at the highest level. He also managed to persuade Bosnian Serbs 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 long-lasting war. The visit coincided with atrocities being committed on both of the belligerent sides. At the beginning of October, the tension was at its peak and the airport of Sarajevo (the main life-line 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, this time directed to Sarajevo. We were navigating in a sea of clouds and fog, which would not allow us to distinguish anything outside the cockpit. The pilots had obviously 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 flying somewhere. Bouncing up and down, I looked at Sergio who was probably also asking himself if we would have made it safely. He jotted down something on a piece of paper and passed it on to me - he wrote: "we are looking for a hole in the clouds". We finally found that hole and through that landed in Sarajevo, virtually re-opening 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.

I, Eugenia, spent two weeks with Sergio in May 1999, at the request of our ILO Director-General, as a member of the UN assessment mission he led to Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro at the height of the NATO offensive against the Yugoslav government and their 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 almost 18 hour work including intellectual brainstorming, long road journeys in unsafe locations, extensive interviews, late meals, delicate negotiations and discussions with various groups and preparation of reports until early hours of the morning in a context of constant noise of bombs falling in places near us sapped the energies of a number of us 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 to us. I could never keep pace with his walking. I remarked on the latter to a colleague later, who pointed out to me that Sergio regularly jogged. This provided me with another confirmation that you cannot be in crisis response work if you are physically as unfit as I was. He had this rigorous approach to gathering the information the mission had been sent by the Security Council for. Thus, a few times he would leave the team behind when he judged the location to be very unsafe and he would go alone with his skeletal personal security. I found this selflessness a testimony of not only his bravery but also his total dedication to his work. Later I thought 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.

After the mission and the submission of the report to the Security Council, he immediately wrote to each member of the mission and added a personal note in his own handwriting to the typed text. He seems not to have the pomposity we often see 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 CAP (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.

This incident while extreme is a wake up call for the UN as a whole to revisit its crisis response interventions, especially in conflict contexts to 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 this false sense of security that the banner of UN (UN building, UN flag, UN caps, UN labels on our vehicles and living in UN compounds) will protect us from harm as they should testify to our neutral stance. This incident seems to have totally shaken us out of this false impression..

On 26 August 2003, the UN Security Council passed a resolution condemning attacks against UN personnel and including them in crimes against humanity. The text is a compromise; not exactly what humanitarian workers and all international civil servants would have wished. The International Criminal Court in fact has not been called in to judge those crimes but instead the national jurisdictions of each member state will solely be responsible. Yet, this is a major event, a development which all have long waited for, while too many UN officers working in all corners of the world in vital missions paid with their life the price extolled by warlords and criminal regimes. It took many decades before reaching agreement on a principle which should have been affirmed long ago, before the sacrifice of so many enthusiastic peace-keepers and aid workers, before the sacrifice 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 through the UN and had his mission clear in his mind without doubts in terms of his own engagement. But he was constantly preoccupied by the high risks to which UN personnel were 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.

By

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