



Source: Vieira de Mello, 6 February 1998,
New York, Photo UN7768909, photographer
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VIEIRA DE MELLO, Sérgio

Brazilian international civil servant and third United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2002-2003

By **Dawisson Belém Lopes and Matheus de Carvalho Hernandez** · Version 7 April 2017

Was born 15 March 1948 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and was killed 19 August 2003 in an attack in Baghdad, Iraq. He was the son of Arnaldo Vieira de Mello, diplomat, and Gilda dos Santos. On 2 June 1973 he married Annie Personnaz, secretary, with whom he had two sons.

Biography

Vieira de Mello was the younger of two children of a Brazilian diplomat. The family lived in Argentina, Italy and, for a short time, Lebanon until his mother decided to stay in Brazil with the children. Vieira de Mello finished his secondary school in Rio de Janeiro at the Liceu Franco-Brasileiro, a school traditionally reserved for the children of diplomats, in 1965. In 1967 he earned a philosophy major at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, which was also the core place of militancy and strikes against the military regime that had resulted from the 1964 coup d'état in Brazil. After an upheaval in Rio de Janeiro Vieira de Mello asked his father to facilitate his admission into a European university and he entered the University of Fribourg, Switzerland in 1967, where he focused his studies on philosophers such as Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Albert Camus and Jean Paul-Sartre. In 1968 he was

admitted to the prestigious Sorbonne University in Paris, France, where he deepened his studies on Georg Hegel and Karl Marx and was influenced by the moral philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch. The circumstances in Paris inspired him to become a revolutionary student. He actively participated in the student demonstrations of May 1968, where he was badly beaten by the police. When the Brazilian military regime dismissed a great number of diplomats in 1969, his father was forced to retire from the diplomatic corps. Vieira de Mello graduated in 1969 and obtained a master's degree in moral philosophy from Sorbonne University in 1970.

Vieira de Mello started looking for a job and, with the help of a family friend, entered an entry examination process at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In November 1969 he was offered a position as a French translator of official documents, being fluent in French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. While his professional path began in the UNHCR headquarters in Geneva, he was assigned his first field mission in 1971 when he was sent to the territory that would later become Bangladesh to assist in the food and shelter distribution organization for Bengalese refugees who were returning home after their expulsion from the eastern part of Pakistan. Bangladesh was a revelation for him, according to a close friend: 'By being in the field, he recognized a part of himself he had never seen before. He understood he was a man of action' (quoted in Power 2008: 26). In 1973 Vieira de Mello was assigned a mission in Sudan, along with a small team, with the purpose of organizing the return of Sudanese refugees and displaced persons to their home country after the 17-year conflict between the government and Southern rebels ended. In June of that year he married Annie Personnaz, who was French and worked as a secretary at the UNHCR. The death of his father interrupted the couple's honeymoon. While working for the UNHCR, Vieira de Mello completed his doctoral thesis, on the role of philosophy in contemporary society, at Sorbonne University in 1974. He then took on another mission, this time to protect and deliver aid to Cypriots displaced in the Greek-Turkish war. In 1975 Vieira de Mello and his wife moved to Mozambique to assist in a refugee crisis, where he soon assumed the mission's leadership. They moved to Peru when his wife gave birth to their first son in 1978, where he worked as the UNHCR's Regional Representative for northern South America. He arranged for the repatriation of Latin American refugees, who had first gone to Chile, but following the coup d'état of Augusto Pinochet in 1973 had fled to Peru, all the way to Europe. In 1980 he returned to Geneva, where he worked in the Personnel Division of the UNHCR, and in 1981 he completed his 'Doctorat d'État ès Lettres et Sciences Humaines' at Sorbonne University. By the end of that year he and his family were sent to Lebanon, where he worked as a senior political officer in a peacekeeping mission. Seconded by the UNHCR, he participated in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, which was mandated to inspect and assist with the removal of Israeli troops in conflict with Palestinians in southern Lebanon. In 1983 the family returned to Geneva, where Vieira de Mello was named UNHCR Deputy Head of Personnel under Kofi Annan. Between 1986 and 1988 Vieira de Mello worked as Chef de Cabinet to Jean-Pierre Hocké, the new High Commissioner for Refugees, and as Secretary to the UNHCR Executive Committee. In the latter capacity he strengthened relations with humanitarian organizations in Geneva.

Known by now for his problem-solving ability and willingness to accept complex jobs, regardless of remote locations or high risks, he became Director of the UNHCR Bureau for Asia in May 1988. He developed a pragmatic approach when dealing with the large flow of Vietnamese 'boat people' who kept leaving Vietnam so many years after the end of hostilities. He negotiated an arrangement with the Hong Kong authorities to send back to Vietnam those refugees who were considered 'illegal immigrants', thus breaking with the UNHCR principle to assist only the voluntary return of people. His Comprehensive Plan of Action brought together the main resettlement countries (including the United States), the countries of first asylum and the country of origin (Vietnam) and made Vieira de Mello known outside of the narrower circuit of the UNHCR. In October 1991, when the four factions that ruled Cambodia signed the Paris Peace Agreements to end the Cambodian-Vietnamese War, the United Nations (UN) was made responsible for a complex mission, also involving the reestablishment of a democratic regime in the country. Vieira de Mello persuaded High Commissioner for Refugees

Sadako Ogata to dispatch him as UNHCR Special Envoy to Cambodia, while he also became Head of the Division of Repatriation and Resettlement Operations of the UN Transitional Authority for Cambodia. The high level of animosity between the Khmer Rouge and the government of Hun Sen prevented the Paris Peace Agreements from being implemented. Throughout 1992 Vieira de Mello and his small UNHCR team started to meet with the leaders of the Khmer Rouge in the territory controlled by that faction in order to enable the return of Cambodian refugees to safety and in September he succeeded in concluding an agreement. His direct negotiations with the factions resulted in the repatriation of some 360,000 Cambodian refugees, who had long been allocated in Thai camps, by June 1993. In the summer of that year Vieira de Mello returned to Geneva. UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali had offered him a position in the UN mission to Angola, but eventually his nationality prevented him from serving there.

In October 1993 the UNHCR seconded Vieira de Mello as Political Director to the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR), the peacekeeping force in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina during the wars in former Yugoslavia. First based in Sarajevo and then in Zagreb, he was responsible for analysing the political climate in Bosnia and mapping humanitarian and diplomatic opportunities for the activities of UNPROFOR, which had adopted a posture not to retaliate for the Serbian attacks. The possibilities for action were small, but Vieira de Mello organized a series of special convoys to stealthily transport Bosnian civilians out of Sarajevo. It was a small but successful mission, with some 300 people rescued. In 1994 he also negotiated ceasefires between Serbs and Bosnians that allowed the opening of routes in Sarajevo for the entry of humanitarian aid and some circulation of people. His insistence on negotiating with the Serbs, however, made it seem that his zeal for UN impartiality had clouded his judgment and given apparently insufficient concern for the safety of Bosnian civilians. He came to recognize this mistake a short time later in the context of the massacre of Bosnian men in Srebrenica in July 1995, when the fall of a safe area under UN protection damaged the organization's standing.

Re-assigned to UNHCR headquarters in Geneva in 1995, Vieira de Mello became Director of Policy Planning and Operations, a new position with supervisory responsibilities over all regional Bureaus and second only to the High Commissioner for Refugees. Ogata asked him to develop strategies for dealing with the refugee crisis in the Great Lakes Region in Africa, where he negotiated with both governments and armed rebels. In October 1996 UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali appointed him as Humanitarian Coordinator for the Great Lakes Region, which bound him directly to the UN Secretariat. During the two months of this appointment Vieira de Mello promoted dialogue between governments, refugees and humanitarian agencies and organizations. As UNHCR Director of Policy Planning and Operations he was also engaged in negotiations with the Afghan Taliban on access and concessions for refugees and addressing problems with regard to refugees and displaced persons in the Commonwealth of Independent States after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In a mission in Zaire in December 1996 he failed to repatriate Rwandan Hutu refugees in an orderly manner, after an agreement with the Tanzanian government to close the UNHCR camps along the Rwandan border, which caused an exodus of half a million people from the camps. In 1997 he returned from Tanzania and, due to marital troubles, lived alone in a rented apartment in Geneva.

In January 1998 Vieira de Mello left the UNHCR, when UN Secretary-General Annan, an old colleague and friend, appointed him Chair of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the UN Secretariat in New York, a position with Under-Secretary-General status. In May 1999 Vieira de Mello headed a UN mission to Kosovo in order to carry out an independent investigation of collateral damage caused by the military operation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as well as Serb ethnic cleansing. After Serbia's surrender in June, Annan appointed Vieira de Mello as his Special Representative in Kosovo. Being a transitional administrator was a challenge at the time, because Vieira de Mello could not guarantee an independence schedule to the Kosovars or ensure security for Serbs living in Kosovo. His main accomplishment was the creation of a multi-ethnic Transitional Council to advise the UN with regard to its task of governing Kosovo. His work in Kosovo ended on 15 July with the

appointment of the UN's permanent administrator Bernard Kouchner from France, who had European support.

In May 1999 the UN negotiated with Indonesia for the East Timorese people to vote for their independence after 24 years of occupation. In October the Security Council created the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor, granting legislative and executive authority first to a UN administrator rather than directly to the East Timorese, with Annan choosing Vieira de Mello for the post. He started his work, as it was customary for him, by approaching as many of the East Timorese leadership as he could, particularly Xanana Gusmão, a former rebel commander and political leader who had long advocated for independence. Next he created the National Consultative Council, worked to improve the budget for the reconstruction of the country's infrastructure and continuously promoted the inclusion of East Timorese into the government. He also took care of the appointment of Timorese judges. Vieira de Mello successfully created a transition schedule according to which East Timor would be completely independent by April 2002, and in May 2002 Gusmão was elected as President of East Timor.

By the end of 2000 Vieira de Mello had met Carolina Larriera, an Argentinean UN official who was also part of the mission in East Timor. In January 2001 they started dating and in December he filed for divorce from his wife. With the final dispatch of the East Timor mission, Vieira de Mello hoped that Annan would send him to a less troubled mission, so that he could enjoy his new relationship. However, faced with the context of the post-September 11 attacks on the United States (US) by Al-Qaeda in 2001, Annan sought a new representative for the post of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights who was reliable, skilled at working with representatives of big powers and cognizant of UN bureaucratic structures. Annan indicated that Vieira de Mello, whose name had already been contemplated in New York, was his preference for the position. Vieira de Mello did not see himself as a defender of human rights, because publicly denouncing and embarrassing governments, an important part of the job, had never been his specialty, but he nonetheless became the successor of outspoken High Commissioner Mary Robinson. On 12 September 2002 he officially began his term as High Commissioner for Human Rights and took on the post stating that the development of human rights around the globe was linked to the ability of collective bargaining, especially with major powers (Gaer and Broecker 2014: 12). He soon realized that his Office was in essence a legal bureaucracy. Because most lawyers had never been in the field to experience the violations they intended to fight, he planned a systematic staff rotation between the Geneva Office and its field missions. He publicly criticized the approaches being used to combat terrorism, as well as the Guantanamo Bay detention camp that the US government had set up in January 2002 as part of its War on Terror. He also did not agree with the claims made for the invasion of Iraq by the US-led Coalition in March 2003 and criticized the US for its lack of dialogue and care for the Security Council resolutions, especially Resolution 1441, which offered Iraq under Saddam Hussein a last chance to comply with its disarmament obligations. The inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency did not find any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. A month after the invasion and overthrow of President Saddam Hussein, the UN Security Council began drafting a resolution that would recognize the US as the occupation authority in Iraq, but would also create the post of Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Iraq, with full autonomy and functioning under the control of the ruling Coalition. From then the rumour began to circulate that Vieira de Mello, who had met with US President George W. Bush and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice in March, would be, with decisive US support and pressure, the UN representative to Iraq. Annan asked him to fill the post and he reluctantly accepted, with two non-negotiable conditions, that it was a temporary position of three months and that he could form his own team, of which Larriera would be a member. During his absence his Deputy High Commissioner Bertrand Ramcharan occupied the post of High Commissioner.

In Iraq Vieira de Mello did not have as much authority as he had in East Timor and Paul Bremer, the Provisional Coalition Administrator of Iraq, seemed disinclined to accept his suggestions.

Negotiations between the two did not go well. Vieira de Mello longed to differentiate himself from the Coalition to the Iraqis. While the Green Zone, the area in Baghdad where the Coalition Provisional Administration was located, was highly protected and therefore inaccessible to Iraqis seeking redress, the Canal Hotel, where the UN headquarters was located, had lowered its security, as ordered by Vieira de Mello, in order to become more accessible, which resulted in more and more people seeking assistance. However, many Iraqis saw the Security Council as a tool in North American hands, which increased hostility between the locals and the foreign administrators. Vieira de Mello had already stated that he feared for the security of the UN employees in the country and, in addition, his own access to Bremer was more restricted every day. He began to publically condemn the killings of civilians by Coalition forces and criticized the administration's non-sharing of power with the Iraqis. 'Who would like to see his country occupied? I would not like to see foreign tanks in Copacabana', he told a Brazilian journalist (Chade 2003). In the meantime he had been informed that his divorce procedure would be done by October. The relationship with his children, with whom he had started exchanging e-mails, had improved. Tired of Iraq, Vieira de Mello was optimistic regarding the reconstruction of his personal life after leaving Baghdad. His plans with Larriera remained steady, they would soon enjoy a long vacation on the beaches of Rio de Janeiro and he would return to his position of High Commissioner for Human Rights, carrying new field experiences to help improve the work. However, on 19 August 2003 an Al-Qaeda member detonated a truck loaded with explosives under his office. While the building was still shaking, Larriera, uninjured but confused, tried to find him, while aware that an entire sector of the building had collapsed. The rescue went on for four hours, devoid of adequate equipment. Although Vieira de Mello was found alive, he did not hold on long enough to come out and his body was removed lifeless from the wreckage, along with 21 other employees. The funeral was held in Rio de Janeiro, the burial in Geneva.

Vieira de Mello was a polyglot, a charismatic person, a workaholic, a cosmopolitan and a highly flexible and sophisticated negotiator. His tireless capacity for dialogue made him look for all parties involved, including dangerous rebels or war criminals. He steadily pushed existing rules to their limit. The complex tension between his political pragmatism and normative philosophy, statism and cosmopolitanism, international standards and field contradictions, made him one of the most enthusiastic advocates of the UN in the world as well as a singular reference among international civil servants (Power 2008: 826).

Archives

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- the website of the Sergio Vieira de Mello Foundation in Geneva, Switzerland, subtitled 'humanitarian action through dialogue' is available at www.sergiovdmfoundation.org

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