

Death in Baghdad and the UN role in Iraq

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With *Chasing the Flame - Sergio Vieira de Mello and the Fight to Save the World* (Penguin Press, 2008) Samantha Power, Anna Lindh Professor at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, has written a fascinating portrait of the kind of compassionate cosmopolitan figure of which there are far too few in this world.

The book is also a remarkably well-researched handbook on the UN, and it contains new and important material for a much-needed discussion, namely: under which circumstances should the UN be engaged in Iraq.

Sergio, as everybody called him, was "the best man for a bad mission". A UN veteran, he was used to clear mandates which gave him clout in difficult situations. Not so in Iraq. A legal adviser at the UN put up a screen saver on her computer with the text: "The UN Charter has left the building".

According to Ms Power, Security Council Resolution 1483 was dictated by the US. It created what Sergio had feared: an impression that the UN was not impartial and instead seen as helping the American occupation and "the Pentagon's plans for free oil".

Thus the mission went wrong from the very beginning, not in Baghdad but in New York, with "the worst UN resolution" that Sergio and his friends had ever seen.

The Brazilian super diplomat was guided by the UN's humanitarian imperative. His mottos were: "Don't ask who started the fire" and "You can't help people from a distance". But in Iraq he and his colleagues died, on an untimely mission, as the result of a terrorist bomb. It is our duty, as members of the Security Council or as member states, to see to it that UN missions do not become missions impossible.

In Iraq there will be no sustainable or legitimate solution without a UN resolution. But a vague UN resolution could become a poisoned chalice for the organisation. We need to have crystal clear resolutions, especially for Chapter 7 missions that deal with war and peace. We should insist on transparency and confidence in their preparation. If not, we not only jeopardise UN personnel but also the credibility of the organisation and future missions.

In the case of Iraq, not only the Iraqis but also the world community need answers about the ulterior goals of the US.

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What will happen, for instance, as a result of the statement, signed on November 26 by President Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki, which seemed to commit the US to a long-term military presence in the country and aimed to replace the existing Security Council mandate with “a bilateral setting”?

Will we see a rejection of “democratic imperialism”, after an illegal war that US Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez called “a nightmare without an end in sight”, and that made both the US and the world less safe? Can we hope for a return to US respect for the UN charter and the Geneva Conventions?

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