

The UN, de Mello and the US occupation of Iraq

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In the aftermath of the bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad, there has been an outpouring of sanctimonious comment from political leaders and the international media defending the UN's role in Iraq and eulogising its special envoy, Sergio Vieira de Mello, who died in the attack.

The UN, it is argued, was simply in Iraq to help the Iraqi people. De Mello and his staff were engaged in humanitarian relief, not military operations. This theme was summed up by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan who denounced the attack on "men and women who went to Iraq for one purpose only: to help the Iraqi people recover their independence and sovereignty."

Annan's remarks, coming just three months after the UN Security Council sanctioned the illegal US invasion and occupation of Iraq, are the height of hypocrisy. Whatever its limited efforts at relieving the suffering of the population, the UN's overriding function in Iraq has been political: to legitimise Washington's indefinite subjugation of the country and the plundering of its oil and other resources.

UN officials were well aware of what the Bush administration wanted the organisation to do. At a joint press conference in late May following his appointment as Annan's special representative to Iraq, de Mello unambiguously declared his attitude to the US occupation: "Working with the Authority is part of the rules of the game. They are responsible for the administration of the country until there is a new order."

Throughout his time in Iraq, de Mello openly functioned as a political emissary for Washington's proconsul in Baghdad, Paul Bremer III—sounding out Iraqi leaders, soliciting support and acting as a go-between. He had a major hand in last month's formation of the quisling body known as the Iraqi Governing Council. When key Shiite leaders threatened to boycott the council, de Mello and his deputy, former Lebanese culture minister Ghassan Salam, travelled to southern Iraq to convince them to back down.

De Mello and Salam were largely responsible for repackaging Bremer's proposed advisory body as "a governing council"—with no significant change in its function or powers. "We have been very active in the process of creating the council and more particularly in the defining of tasks," de Mello proudly declared after its inaugural meeting. He then set out on an extensive tour of the Middle East—to Saudi Arabia, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Turkey and Syria—in an effort to persuade regional leaders to recognise and work with the puppet council.

Having helped erect a political framework for US rule in Iraq, de Mello was due to resume his post as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. He obtained the job last September with the backing of the Bush administration which was openly hostile to his predecessor Mary Robinson. De Mello's willingness to keep his mouth shut over Washington's flagrant abuses of democratic rights—with the sole exception of a muted criticism of the illegal detention of hundreds of detainees at Guantanamo Bay—clearly endeared him to Washington. Indeed he was even being touted as the future UN Secretary General after

Annan retired.

De Mello's prominent role in Iraq, far from indicating any genuine concern on the part of the UN for the plight of the Iraqi people, was a measure of the assignment's political importance and sensitivity. Whoever took the job was required to dress up an openly neo-colonial occupation in order to defuse the widespread anger of the Iraqi people and to enlist the support of competing Iraqi elites, other Middle Eastern governments and US rivals in Europe and Asia.

De Mello was handed the task for two main reasons. Firstly, he had the support of the Bush administration. Just prior to his announced appointment, he flew to Washington for private talks at the White House with President Bush and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice. Secondly, de Mello, probably more than most UN bureaucrats, epitomised the shifting role of the UN in the 1990s. During that time he made a high profile career out of providing an acceptable public face for imperialist interventions.

The UN has been a den of imperialist intrigue ever since its formation in 1945. Throughout the Cold War, however, the existence of the Soviet Union remained an obstacle to the predatory interests of the major powers. In its relations with Asia, Africa and Latin America, Washington was compelled to wheel and deal with the Stalinist bureaucrats in Moscow and to recognise, in form at least, the principle of national sovereignty. The UN served as a useful clearinghouse for mediating these Cold War relations.

But in the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union ended these constraints. Driven by profound economic contradictions, the US and its rivals increasingly turned to direct military intervention to secure their interests. In the name of humanitarian concerns, national independence and sovereignty have been trampled upon. And in what has been cynically termed "ethical imperialism," the UN has performed the critical function of providing the "ethical" gloss for ever-more naked neo-colonial ambitions.

Nowhere have these political processes been as evident as in Iraq. Seizing on the invasion of Kuwait as the pretext, all the major and minor powers backed the US-led Gulf War in 1990-91 as a means of legitimising their own colonial adventures. As the International Committee of the Fourth International explained at the time: "The proceedings at the United Nations, that rather seedy centre of imperialist debauchery, were as dignified as those of a military brothel, with scores of bourgeois diplomats lining up outside the doors of the Security Council to 'get in on the act'... Underlying the broad participation in this coalition was the unstated understanding that the war against Iraq would legitimise a revival of colonial policy by all the imperialist powers" [Oppose Imperialist War and Colonialism! Manifesto of the ICFI, page 3].

A political troubleshooter for imperialism

It was in this political climate that De Mello's career flourished. The son of a senior Brazilian diplomat, de Mello's entire working life, after graduating from the Sorbonne University in Paris, was spent as a UN functionary. He started with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Geneva and rose through its ranks by acting as its on-the-spot representative in a number of areas of sharp political conflict, including East Pakistan/Bangladesh 1971-72 in the immediate aftermath of India's invasion; Cyprus 1975-77 following the Turkish invasion; and Mozambique 1975-77 in the midst of independence and civil war.

De Mello proved his adaptability when he was assigned in 1981-83 as senior political adviser to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Initially established in 1978 to supervise the withdrawal of the Israeli troops that had invaded southern Lebanon, UNIFIL rapidly became little more than the humanitarian face for a permanent occupation force when the Israeli army reinvaded in 1982, attacked Beirut and unleashed a brutal massacre of 2,000 Palestinians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla. De Mello functioned as the intermediary between the Israeli army, its fascistic militia allies and a hostile population.

In the 1990s, de Mello rose to prominence as one of the UN's top political figures. In 1991-92, he played a major role in implementing the settlement to end the long-running civil war in Cambodia. This was the first in a series of aggressive imperialist interventions in which the principle of national sovereignty was openly cast aside. Anxious to end the destabilising influence of the civil war and to open up Cambodia as a source of cheap labour, the major powers pressured the rival Cambodian factions into agreeing to hand power to a UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) which would supervise a power-sharing arrangement and future elections.

De Mello was appointed special envoy of the UN High Commissioner for Cambodia in December 1991 and given the task of laying the political groundwork for the formation of UNTAC the following year. He headed the advance party of 1,500 military and civilian personnel, which rapidly swelled to over 20,000 when UNTAC was established. While too junior to head the UN body, de Mello nevertheless stayed on as director of refugee repatriation and in charge of mine clearance. A decade after the UNTAC intervention, Cambodia is as poor and politically unstable as it was in 1991—but it is open for business to foreign investors.

De Mello's role as a senior UNHCR official was no small factor in the growing demand for his services. Throughout the 1990s, the plight of refugees increasingly became one of the main political pretexts for imperialist intervention in the Balkans, Africa and Asia. In this new era of "ethical imperialism," de Mello was an ideal front man. He combined good looks and charm with a certain political adroitness and ruthlessness that were all put to good use by his paymasters: the UN and the major powers.

In 1993, he was sent to the Balkans as the delegate in Bosnia Herzegovina for the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for the former Yugoslavia. Having provoked the breakup of Yugoslavia by recognising first Slovenia and Croatia then Bosnia Herzegovina, the major powers were determined to exploit the ethnic violence they had helped to instigate to further their own interests in this key strategic region. The UN provided the overarching framework for the intervention of NATO troops from the US and Europe.

The United Nations Protective Force (UNPROFOR) originally established to manage three areas of Croatia was extended in 1992 to Bosnia Herzegovina. Its size was increased by 1995 to nearly 40,000 military personnel who were assigned to enforce a ban on all military flights over Bosnia Herzegovina and supervise safe areas around Sarajevo and five other towns. In 1994, de Mello as head of Civil Affairs for UNPROFOR lay the political basis for the 1995 Dayton Accord, which transformed Bosnia Herzegovina into a new kind of semi-colonial entity run by a High Representative imposed by the US and the EU.

In 1995, de Mello returned to UNICEF Headquarters in Geneva where he was elevated to the key post of Director of Policy Planning and Operations. He had particular responsibilities for the refugees in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)—that is, the masses of people left destitute by the break-up of the former Soviet Union. He also oversaw UN operations in Central Africa in the midst of civil strife that erupted in Rwanda. In 1998, he was rewarded with the post of Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator at the UN Headquarters in New York.

Neo-colonial governor

But de Mello's most critical role was played in three key arenas—Kosovo, East Timor and Iraq.

In June 1999, he was installed in Kosovo as Special Representative of the Secretary General—an interim administrator with full powers to establish and preside over a new civilian authority in the province of Yugoslavia. In what was to become the modus operandi for subsequent interventions, the US and EU had whipped up a hysterical media campaign based on lies and half-truths. Wildly exaggerated claims of systematic killings of ethnic Albanians by the Yugoslav army and Serb militia were used to justify a massive bombardment of Yugoslav cities and towns. As later, more sober reports indicated, the greatest loss of life in Kosovo and the largest waves of refugees were the result of the NATO bombing campaign, not the activities of the Yugoslav military.

The UN subscribed to and promulgated all of Washington's falsifications without a murmur of criticism, legitimising the NATO takeover of Kosovo. Again de Mello was the political trailblazer. In May 1999, before the hostilities were over, he led a 12-day mission of UN agencies into Kosovo. While the UN insisted that the mission was "purely humanitarian," it lay the basis for a complete takeover of civilian functions. Like the High Representative in Bosnia Herzegovina, de Mello filled the role of a colonial governor resting on the military might of some 50,000 NATO and Russian troops occupying the province. As head of the UN Interim administration in Kosovo (UNMIK), he wielded power over the police and judiciary as well as UN officials at the district and municipal level. Along with NATO, he bears responsibility for the vicious campaign of violence by the thugs of the Kosovo Liberation Army which led to the expulsion of tens of thousands of Serbs and Gypsies from the province.

Having laid the political basis for continuing NATO domination of Kosovo, de Mello was installed just months later as UN Transitional Administrator in East Timor (UNTAET)—a post he held until formal independence was granted to the half island in May 2002. Like the NATO war on Yugoslavia, the "humanitarian" justification for the Australian-led military intervention into East Timor was completely manufactured. Canberra was well aware of the attacks that the Indonesian military and its militia were preparing to unleash on pro-independence supporters in East Timor but cynically calculated that the violence would provide the necessary pretext for plans being drawn up for the deployment of Australian troops. Far from acting out of concern for the plight of the East Timorese, the Howard government's primary motive was to counter renewed Portuguese claims in its former colony and to secure control over the lucrative Timor Gap oil and gas reserves.

In all the media obituaries, de Mello's reign in East Timor is counted as his greatest triumph. What he left behind, however, is a tiny state which is completely dependent politically, economically and militarily on the major powers and whose population remains mired in poverty. De Mello's legacy in East Timor is an unrepresentative regime installed with

scant regard for the democratic rights of the East Timorese. The vast majority of people, particularly the youth, are unemployed and have no prospects of a job. Under de Mello, the limited social services available under Indonesian rule were slashed, leaving large sections of the population without adequate access to health, education and other basic services.

In the eyes of the major powers, de Mello's great achievement was that amid this deepening social and economic disaster he created the illusion of peace, progress and independence. Behind the façade, the UN still exercises key functions in "independent" East Timor, the Australian-dominated military force remains and Canberra has managed to bludgeon the Dili government into ceding control over the lion's share of the Timor Gap gas reserves to Australia.

The US-led invasion of Iraq represented a turning point for the United Nations. It brought to the surface in the Security Council deep-going tensions between the US and Europe over their interests in the Middle East and internationally. Although the UN did not put the final seal of approval on the US invasion, by passing resolution 1441, it nevertheless legitimised the lie upon which the war was based: that Iraq had an arsenal of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons that posed an imminent threat to the world. After the event, the UN stepped in to endorse what was an illegal and preemptive war of aggression that had cost the lives of thousands, if not tens of thousands, of Iraqi civilians. The UN's willingness to do so exposed its utter worthlessness in the eyes of millions of people around the world who took to the streets to protest the war.

Having sanctioned the US occupation, the UN sent its top troubleshooter to Iraq to repeat what he had done during the previous decade. But in the case of Iraq, the population had already suffered 12 years of bitter experiences of the UN acting on behalf of the US and its allies. The UN had supervised the devastating economic sanctions that are estimated to have cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians—men, women and children. Its offices in Baghdad were the operational centre for the UN weapons inspection teams and the intrigues that were used to justify one US military provocation after another against Iraq.

De Mello was able to use his political skills, honed throughout the 1990s, to cajole, badger and bully various Iraqi politicians, religious leaders and emigres into forming a Governing Council as a front for the US occupation. But the illusion remained precisely that. De Mello could do nothing to halt the tide of frustration and anger, which is giving rise to daily attacks on occupation forces. As he noted himself in one of his final interviews: "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."

But for all de Mello's efforts to cultivate a caring image, the UN was and is broadly viewed by Iraqis as a tool of the US occupation. The bombing of its headquarters in Baghdad is a sign that the 60-year period in which the UN could function as a cloak for the intrigues of the major powers is rapidly coming to an end. Instead of regarding the UN as an agency for peace, justice and social equality, millions of Iraqis, along with many others around the world, are coming to see the UN for what it is: a dirty accomplice in the crimes of imperialism.



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