



Sergio Vieira de Mello

REVIEW

A man in search of peace

By *OLGAYOLDI*.

SERGIO, a film released earlier this year, covers the life and tragic death of top UN diplomat Sergio Vieira de Mello, one of the most highly regarded people in the field of global diplomacy.

He was deeply respected and admired for his achievements in many UN humanitarian and political arenas. The film, which sets out to celebrate his life, premiered at Sundance in the US earlier this year and was directed by Greg Barker from a script written by Craig Borten.

“I wanted to explore Sergio more, his journey and struggles, his purpose in the world and being true and authentic to that purpose, which was his struggle,” Barker said. It can now be viewed on Netflix

The action starts with Sergio (Wagner Moura) and his partner Carolina Larriera (Ana de Armas) arriving in Baghdad in 2003 with the challenging mission of restoring order in Iraq after the massive destruction caused by the US-led Coalition that brought down Saddam Hussein. Appointed as the special representative of the UN Secretary-General, Sergio hopes to bridge the gap between the Iraqi people and the Coalition. His mission was to help stabilise the country and enable elections for a quick return to Iraqi sovereignty.

But soon into the deployment in August 2003, a

terrorist attack by al Qaeda strikes UN headquarters and leaves Sergio and others trapped underneath tons of rubble – where hours later he dies. The bombing, ordered by terrorist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, claimed 22 lives and injured more than 100 others.

The film shows that the deaths might have been avoided if the US Army had had the gear to lift the rubble and free Sergio and others who were trapped, but the world’s most powerful army did not have such equipment – and only two American soldiers were assigned to lift the rubble with their bare hands. Of course, by the time they reached those trapped, it was too late.

Sergio has flashbacks of his life as he moves closer to death, so we see him in action in East Timor, Baghdad and falling in love with UN economic adviser Carolina Larriera. Their love story becomes the primary focus of the film, so unfortunately we don’t get much of an insight into his life’s work, just glimpses here and there.

Sergio, who was UN High Commissioner of Human Rights at the time, had reluctantly accepted the four-month appointment in Iraq. He had been pressured by the then UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, who was in turn pressured by the US government to appoint Sergio, as he was seen to be the best man for the mission

and the main hope of restoring peace in Iraq. His long trajectory in post-conflict transitions had earned him a reputation. He would show the Americans what to do and what not to do.

Born in Rio de Janeiro to a family of diplomats, Sergio lived in many countries as a child and spoke five languages. He studied philosophy at the University of Paris and the Sorbonne, and participated in the May 1968 student rebellion. He was with the UN all his working life, 34 years, holding posts in Bangladesh, Sudan, Cyprus, Mozambique, Lebanon, Cambodia, Bosnia, Congo, Kosovo and East Timor.

Described by a journalist as “a cross between James Bond and Bobby Kennedy”, Sergio had firsthand experience assisting societies emerging from oppression, war and tyranny; implementing peace accords, overseeing elections, running the provisional government of East Timor and settling refugees. He was known for quickly understanding the dynamics of any given conflict, building bridges between opposing parties. He earned the trust and respect of rebel leaders, autocrats or ordinary people, and developed real solutions that could be accepted by all parties.

Former US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power, in her biography *Chasing the Flame: One Man's Fight to Save the World*, describes Sergio as “a guy who lived through and saw more human misery than maybe anyone else, and he still remained optimistic and inhabited the grey zone between right and wrong or good and evil. He actually got things done in the real world while still maintaining empathy, hope and a sense of fun, and was effective”.

Power, who is now a professor of Global Leadership and Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School, met Sergio in Zagreb when she was a freelance journalist covering the war in Bosnia and Sergio was a senior adviser to the UN peacekeeping force there. She was impressed by his commitment and dedication to the principles for which the UN stands. “Sergio's ability to charm was so great,” Power writes, “that each faction in the war came to believe he was on its side. He used the feelings of people to influence leaders. He was able to channel those feelings and leverage them in order to get results where others mediators just were unable.”

In each posting he confronted violence, poverty, human rights abuses and difficulties of all kinds. One of his biggest successes was his leadership in East Timor where he was the Administrator of the UN Transitional Authority serving the de facto governor of the state between 1999 and 2002. He supervised the country's path to independence from Indonesia. Under his leadership the UN built the political and bureaucratic infrastructure of the new East Timorese state and handed power to its citizens as soon as it was possible.

In the 1980s Sergio helped resolve an intractable refugee crisis through multilateral cooperation. Thousands of Vietnamese people were arriving by boat on the shores of South-East Asian countries as they fled economic hardship and political oppression. At least 200,000 refugees were resettled and 350,000 remained scattered in refugee camps from Hong Kong to Thailand, but the number of people kept increasing and the situation was becoming unsustainable.

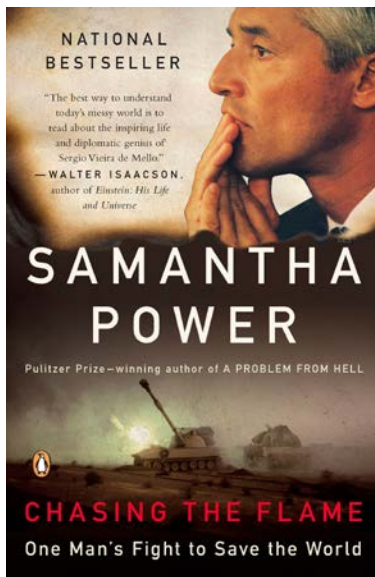
So the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) developed a plan that would facilitate the orderly return of the refugees to Vietnam, while also providing a screening process so those at risk of persecution could be identified and resettled in another country.

For the first time, regional cooperation between different countries (including Vietnam) took place that enabled a solution. The result was a multilateral agreement called the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) that allowed those found not to be refugees to return to their country. About 70,000 people were sent back to Vietnam. The Vietnamese government agreed not to punish them and allowed monitoring of the returnees. The CPA addressed all aspects of the problem, including the reasons for their flight.

“The CPA is a model for multilateral cooperation built on the principles of international solidarity, burden sharing and proper acceptance of responsibilities,” Sergio wrote. “Its purpose was to end the ongoing tragedy of the high seas and preserve asylum while reducing incentives for further mass outflow.” Indeed, the CPA is regarded as the most significant example of successful UNHCR-led cooperation in recent history. Sergio, who was the UN bureau chief for Asia and Oceania, played a significant role.

In 1991 Sergio was assigned to work in Cambodia as special envoy for the UNHCR as part of a big UN peacekeeping mission following the Paris Peace Agreement. The mission entailed helping Cambodia achieve peace and reconciliation and its first democratic elections. It also included clearing the mines and repatriating 362,209 refugees from along the Thai border. Many would have to return to a territory under the Khmer Rouge control that they fled.

Thus, gaining the cooperation of the Khmer Rouge was essential. Samantha Power wrote that few outsiders had ventured into Khmer Rouge territory, but Sergio didn't hesitate and went deep into the jungle to meet a key leader, Ieng Sary – at one point having leave his car and wade it across a river. On his arrival he was cordially received by Sary and treated to a sumptuous lunch, where Sergio sought to convince him that his group could remain a significant player in Cambodia if they cooperated. They did. The repatriation went smoothly. That achievement greatly



enhanced Sergio Vieira de Mello's reputation in the international community.

When Sergio arrived in Sarajevo in 1993 to take part in a peacekeeping operation, the city was under siege from Serb snipers. He met Serb leader Radovan Karadzic and he told reporters: "The UN cannot tolerate the continuation of ethnic cleansing and forced eviction of civilians." The UN provided humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping operations. In the face of attacks against civilians by the Serbs, some UN officials wanted the peacekeepers to take a firmer stand and challenge the Serbs militarily. Sergio refused, saying it would violate the UN's neutrality and harm its broader humanitarian goals. However, while in Sarajevo he organised a clandestine UN convoy to transport Bosnian civilians past Serb checkpoints to the airport and out of the city, saving the lives of 298 people.

From the 1970s Sergio intervened in most major conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America in different capacities, but Iraq proved to be the most challenging.

Sergio had opposed the invasion of Iraq. Shortly before leaving for Baghdad he told a Wall Street Journal reporter: "After cursing the UN or calling it irrelevant or comparing it to the League of Nations ... the US very quickly came back, as it were, even though they will never admit it, in search of international legitimacy. My guess is that the US and UK and those that have joined will realise ... that this is too big, that building a democratic Iraq is not simple ... and that as a result they will realise that they have every interest in encouraging others who are seen to be more impartial, independent and more palatable to join in and help create these new institutions."

When Sergio arrived in Iraq he was appalled at what he saw as the Coalition's excessive use of force against

civilians. At a press conference he said: "The day when Iraqis govern themselves must come quickly. In coming days I intend to listen intensively to what the Iraqi people have to say."

Unfortunately, Iraqis would not have a chance to determine their political future any time soon.

The terms of UN Security Council Resolution 1483, which authorised the Coalition to occupy Iraq, had been dictated by US diplomats. "Resolution 1483 effectively granted the Americans and the British the legal authority to choose Iraq's political leaders, spend its oil revenues and transform its legal, political and economic structures," Samantha Power wrote in *The New Yorker*. "For the first time in history, the Security Council was upholding the occupation of one UN member state by another."

Iraqis' growing hostility towards the Coalition and the UN presence in Iraq made it difficult for Sergio to meet his objectives. They hadn't forgotten UN arms inspections and the economic sanctions imposed on Saddam Hussein's regime that had crippled the economy for years, or the UN's association with the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA).

At the same time, Sergio lacked the authority that he had enjoyed in East Timor and other countries to guide the transition adequately. Soon after Sergio's arrival Paul Bremer, the US Presidential Envoy to Iraq and head of the CPA, announced his intentions to expel Ba'ath Party members from government posts, ban the Ba'ath Party and dismantle the Iraqi Army. "Sergio now realised that the Coalition considered itself an actual government," Power wrote.

Sergio collaborated by becoming an intermediary between the Coalition and the Iraqi people. He travelled widely to meet Iraqi religious and civic leaders to gain their thoughts and perspectives on the new Iraq. Religious leaders insisted they wanted the Constitution to be written by elected Iraqi leaders, not a foreign power.

Bremer worked with Sergio to create the Iraqi Interim Governing Council, with Sergio providing the names of potential members. As soon as the Council was constituted, Bremer decided he no longer needed Sergio and cut him out of the process. "Bremer seemed unwilling to give the UN a substantive role," Power wrote, noting that Sergio offered his assistance, knowledge and experience to guide the transition, but was ignored. He demanded greater cooperation, but relations became strained. "Ignored by the US Army command, patronised by the arrogant US proconsul Paul Bremer, he knows that his presence in Baghdad was a terrible mistake."

The Council was dismissed by Iraqis as a product of the Americans. During this period the number of Iraqis killed by US forces rose and the hostility of Iraqis increased along with it. Sergio was highly critical of the occupation

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— *Samantha Power*

of Iraq. In an op-ed article he wrote: “An occupation can be grounded in nothing but good intentions. But morally and practically, I doubt it can ever be legitimate; its time, if it ever had one, has passed.” He urged the Americans and the British to aim openly and effectively at their own disappearance.

This statement would be the first ever public UN condemnation of the Coalition human rights violations in Iraq, but was never released. A truck loaded packed with

450kg of explosives detonated on the street just below Sergio’s office, eventually killing him.

According to Power, the US military wasn’t equipped to respond to a large-scale terrorist attack and had not brought any useful equipment to Iraq. Fire-fighting equipment that could have helped had by then been looted. The film did not show, but as Sergio lay dying under the rubble, his last words were spoken to a rescuer who had managed to crawl down to him, were: “Don’t abandon the mission.”

The UN did maintain a presence in Iraq despite the danger it faced. “Why had Annan so eagerly accepted the Security Council’s summons to go to Iraq?” asks Michael Massing in *The Nation*. “Why did he send his finest staff to enforce a non-existent mandate? Why, after the attack, had he chosen to keep UN staff in harm’s way even when they were not performing vital tasks? What would it take for the UN Secretary-General in fact to learn to say no to powerful countries?”

A month later a second terrorist attack on the UN base killed a security guard, two Iraqi policemen and injured 19 people. In October 2003 the UN pulled out of Baghdad and the US was left on its own.

Paul Bremer remained in Iraq. Critics claimed his extreme measures (disbanding the Iraqi army, banning the Ba’ath Party and removing Ba’ath Party members from top government positions, then trying to privatise much of Iraq’s infrastructure and mineral wealth), helped create and worsen an atmosphere of discontent among Iraqis, fuelling the insurgency against the American occupation.

In 2004 he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America’s highest civil award. In 2007 Bremer appeared before a congressional committee investigating fraud and abuse and was questioned about missing funds (\$8.8 billion of Iraq’s money) during his tenure as head of the CPA.

The film finishes with real-life coverage of Kofi Annan honouring his fallen colleague on CNN. “His work there is left unfinished, but please God, we shall complete it,” Annan said. “We cannot accept that Sergio had to die at this time, in this way, or that anything good can come of it. We cannot accept that all his brilliance, his energy, devotion to his staff and his loyalty to the ideals of the UN have so abruptly been taken from us. The people of Mozambique, Lebanon, Cambodia, Bosnia, Congo, Kosovo or Timor Leste will remember him as one who was there to help them in their hour of need to relieve human suffering and champion human rights.

“Sergio, you have entered that pantheon of heroes that the UN wished it did not have. You will shine forever among our brightest stars.” R