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Making Sergio Vieira de Mello's death count

It is difficult to be among the few who publicly criticized the late UN representative in Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello (The Daily Star, June 23, 2003). Criticism by politicians of a rival who is subsequently murdered is not uncommon in the Third World, where assassinations are an unfortunate part of the trade. On such occasions, the politicians express their regrets, and these are, generally, accepted. But for a nonpolitician like myself to criticize a nonpolitician like de Mello is unusual, and adds personal remorse to the distress every decent person must feel when considering the wanton crime against the UN headquarters in Baghdad on Tuesday.

To criticize de Mello in public was also more disturbing, in retrospect, since I had had some exchanges with him before his appointment in Iraq. I believed that a proactive UN role there would be useful to help Iraqis build democracy in their country, if its main focus was the defense of human rights. Beyond process and symbolism, a substantive, transitional mechanism was needed in the shape of a countrywide deployment of human rights monitors, which de Mello, as UN high commissioner for human rights, could organize. He knew about these efforts, and he rang me about them from Geneva at the end of last April.

De Mello wanted to assuage the hawks in the Bush administration about an eventual UN role in Iraq, and I was keen to see human rights monitors deployed in the country, a move supported by leading decision-makers in Washington. I promised de Mello to write to Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, whom I hold in high esteem, about the usefulness of a UN role, and I did. Months later the Iraqi morass continues, de Mello is dead, and there are no human rights monitors on the ground. Could things have been different?

Even if it is now much harder to organize such a venture because of the increasing violence, the deployment of human rights monitors remains the key to a peaceful, democratic Iraq. Without their mediation, American and British troops will continue to face people with whom they cannot even converse. Accidents will multiply, as 19-year-old soldiers become increasingly nervous and fearful. The cycle of violence will spiral upward. Extremists in Iraq, whether former President Saddam Hussein's diehard supporters or Islamic militants who see Iraq as a latter-day version of Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, are trying to derail stabilization by attacking infrastructure, ambushing US soldiers, and killing Iraqi interpreters, policemen, an emerging Iraqi leadership and now UN officials.

This poses a question on the character of the transitional administration until Iraqis can again fully govern themselves. If the UN and the Anglo-American coalition wish to show that their occupation of Iraq is of a different disposition than what is occurring in Kashmir or the West Bank, to choose two established, but also different

examples, then something additional is needed.

De Mello clearly realized, and insisted, that the passage to indigenous Iraqi rule had to be accelerated to alleviate the physical dimension of the foreign occupation. However, the transition to Iraqi rule is still months away, and the deployment of human rights monitors would still be the most significant domestic and international signal of a desire to adopt a new, different type of approach in Baghdad. Today, this appears more difficult to implement, but I can see no other symbol that would be more effective to help undermine extremism.

The revulsion expressed by the world towards the assassination of so many good and dedicated UN people who came to Baghdad to help rebuild a devastated country is overwhelming. The ultimate sacrifice of de Mello and his colleagues should not be in vain. Security without a vision for democracy will not allow the killings to abate, whether the victims are UN employees or occupying troops.

Toward the end of my conversation with him in April, de Mello insisted on speaking about the anxieties UN security personnel had at the prospect of the organization's returning to Iraq. The fact that he paid the ultimate price on Tuesday showed that he was willing to courageously look beyond these warnings. For his death to represent a turning point in Iraq's recent history, the deployment of human rights monitors must remain a priority.

Chibli Mallat is a lawyer and law professor in Beirut. He wrote this commentary for ***THE DAILY STAR***