

**Brief records of the 47th seminar of GPAJ on
“Power vs. Authority: The UN role in Baghdad in 2003”
by Ms. Carolina Larriera
on 24 October 2020**

The seminar was conducted by online Zoom. Ms. Naoko Kumagai, Vice President of Global Peacebuilding Association of Japan (GPAJ) opened the 47th Seminar. She then gave the floor to Ms. Arbenita Sopaj, who briefly introduced Ms. Carolina Larriera.

Ms. Larriera started her presentation by giving a concise background of the bombing that took place in Baghdad on 19 August 2003. She explained how the world was situated in 2001-2002 in the wake of 9/11 attack. She elaborated the war in Afghanistan, which was a preemptive war. Many powerful countries within the Security Council criticized the US and broke ranks with it. She further stated that the United Nations was dragged into the war and requested to deploy United Nations Mission Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) in Baghdad. She reveals that her civil union spouse Sergio De Mello was strongly requested by the Secretary-General Kofi Annan to lead the mission.

She also briefly explained the debate that took place at the General Assembly in 2002. President Bush at that time stated that if the UN did not support the removal of Saddam Hussein and the invasion of Iraq, it would become irrelevant. There were deep divisions within the Security Council, especially between the US and France on a potential and hypothetical role of the UN in Baghdad.

When Sergio de Mello was requested to be the SRSG, he was High Commissioner for Human Rights, covering China, Catalonia, Venezuela, Cuba, Congo, and Timor-Leste. Therefore, he did not want to go to Iraq. He turned down Kofi Annan’s request twice, but eventually he decided to go and arrived in Baghdad on 1 June. It is particularly important to highlight that when we arrived in Baghdad there were three actors he had to deal with. First, there was already an existing UN team deployed there and he was considered as the newcomer. Second, there was the CPA (Coalition Provisional Authority) led by the UK and the US and they made it clear that they were in charge. Third, there were Iraqis, who worried about the UN.

Ms. Larriera was a member of a small mission of 20 people headed by Sergio de Mello. Their duty was to implement a mandate entrusted by the SC resolution 1483/2003, which includes “enabling as soon as possible the full restoration of Iraq’s full sovereignty and return to the community of nations”. Sergio de Mello said, “Although the mandates are not very clear, lack of clarity allows the UN to play a role in Iraq in accordance with development of the situation on the ground”. Upon the arrival in Iraq he talked to many Iraqi people to understand what the best for them and how the UN could meet their needs. As a result of the meetings, four themes were emerged: first, Iraqi wanted to see themselves back at the leadership of their country; second, they wanted to see the arrival of the security and the rule of law; third, they wanted the restoration of basic service (electricity, water, school) etc.; and fourth, they wanted to see establishment of permanent Iraqi.

Sergio de Mello warned the Security Council that the UN presence in Iraq was vulnerable to anyone who would seek to target the UN. He stated that security continues relying on the reputation of the UN. He further highlighted in the Security Council that the coalition had the primary duty to restore security, law, and order. The human rights, particularly the rights of women were the central issue, since the scale of the abuses of human rights under the Saddam Hussein regime were tremendous.

Sergio de Mello was working with Iraqi people to bringing the best for them. He said, "How effectively they can deal with those challenges and achieve harmony for their future depends on how effectively they can deal with the past, since the past and the future are always unbreakably linked". He was a realist, and he was fully aware of the cynical power dynamics both in the countries and in the UN where he served for 30 years.

The UN in its 75th anniversary is facing the biggest challenges in the history, and the most important point is that its credibility is at stake. Ms. Larriera concluded that we need a stronger UN to protect weak people from the tyranny.

Mr. Toshiyuki Niwa commented that Sergio de Mello took a big risk and challenge and asked why he rejected to have security guards when he was offered.

Mr. Ken Inoue commented that after the tragic incident in Bagdad the UN tightened the security of the staff members and one of the recent reports was made by former Force Commander Dos Santos Cruz, who recommended that peacekeeping operations should be heavily armed, and ask Ms. Larriera's view on the report.

Ms. Ai Kihara-Hunt asked three questions: first, what kind of information Sergio De Mello had obtained before he went to Baghdad and when he arrived in Iraq; second, his character as a magnificent leader in the UN; and third, if the UN's view on human rights and the rule of law was different from that of Iraqi people.

Mr. Kazuhide Kuroda stated that he had lost his secretary Ranilo Buenaventura along with Sergio De Mello and commented that Sergio De Mello and the UN had a big gap, but he tried to change the UN. Mr. Kuroda asked Ms. Larriera what could be better done in the communication strategies of the UN.

Ms. Michiko Kuroda asked reaction of the Security Council when Sergio de Mello talked about the UN reputation in July 2003, stating that the loss of their lives could have been prevented.

In his concluding remark, Mr. Sukehiro Hasegawa noted as significant three points. First Sergio de Mello had wanted to remain in Geneva as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights as he was addressing human rights issues throughout the world. Secondly, with regard to protection of UN staff, Mr. Hasegawa shared a similar experience he had in Timor-Leste. There was a bombing in Bali, and Al Qaeda warned that Timor-Leste needs to be liberated from Australia and the UN. When the Portuguese army offered him protection, he declined the offer, since he felt, like Sergio de Mello, that the UN must be independent.

Thirdly, Mr. Hasegawa found important the point made by the guest speaker about the policy making structure and context which governed UN peace missions, i.e. the Security Council composition that excluded such countries as Brazil, Germany and Japan and the international context in which UN operations took place. He then concluded the seminar by thanking Ms. Larriera and all participants from various parts of the world and emphasizing importance of leadership and accountably Sergio de Mello demonstrated in his life.

Report by
Arbenita Sopaj