

August 21, 2003: United Nations: USCIRF mourns death of Sergio Vieira de Mello and 23 Colleagues

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WASHINGTON - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) mourns the tragic death of Sergio Vieira de Mello, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, who was on leave as Special Representative of the Secretary General in Iraq, and his colleagues. De Mello and 23 other UN employees were killed in Tuesday's bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad. "For more than thirty years, Mr. Vieira de Mello dedicated his life to promoting peace, ending conflict, and respecting the rights of every person, particularly those seeking refuge from repression and armed conflict. Both professionally and personally, he was incredibly well respected. His skills, courage, and dedication were vital to the reconstruction of Iraq. The Commission also extends its deepest condolences to the family and friends of all those who were so tragically killed," said USCIRF Chair Michael K. Young. Commission Vice Chair, Felice D. Gaer, along with former Commissioner Ambassador Shirin Tahir-Kheli, met with Vieira de Mello in August 2002, shortly after he was named to the post of High Commissioner for Human Rights. "In our conversation, which touched on the situations in Afghanistan and Indonesia, he affirmed the indivisibility of ending conflict, protecting all human rights, and defending freedom of religion for all - women and men, citizens and refugees. He recognized the importance of looking at aid and reconstruction efforts through a human-rights lens," said Gaer. In late May, Sergio, as he insisted he be addressed, took a leave of absence from his human rights post to serve as the UN Special Representative to Iraq and his assignment was scheduled to last four months. He was tasked with coordinating the United Nations' efforts to rebuild civil authority and promote humanitarian relief. According to the United Nations, Vieira de Mello had said the top of his agenda was to consult Iraqi leaders and opinion makers "to make sure that the interests of the Iraqi people come first" in rebuilding their country. "He worked brilliantly for decades, with courage and grace. His death is an enormous loss to his family, friends, the United Nations, and the protection of human rights around the world," Young said.

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