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De Mello's death a 'big loss'

M.K. Megan; June Ramli

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - The death of top United Nations envoy to Iraq Sergio Vieira de Mello has been described as not only a loss to the world body but also to mankind.

Close friend and former colleague Datuk N.Parameswaran, who is the Malaysian High Commissioner to Singapore, said de Mello did admirable work for the UN in all his postings including successfully establishing a government in East Timor.

Parameswaran and de Mello worked together during the East Timor mission where they tackled the issue of putting a proper administration in place, safe return of refugees and defusing tension with dialogues with militia leaders.

De Mello, the top UN official in Iraq and a former UN high commissioner for human rights who had served the organisation in trouble spots around the globe was killed in a bomb blast along with 13 other people yesterday. He was 55.

"He was the governing authority during the crisis and he managed to put all the warring factions together and form a government," he said in a telephone interview from Singapore.

He said de Mello did not only have great administrative capabilities but also a charming personality.

"We shared many adventurous moments together including a near plane crash when flying over East Timor, had been shot at when flying in helicopters and had to penetrate areas with heavy militia activities. All these, I would say were near death experiences but he handled them coolly," he added.

Parameswaran said although he resigned from the UN after working under de Mello for two years, they kept in touch through e-mail.

"Sadly I did not get to reply to his last e-mail to me. He was telling me about his job and some of his personal things. There was nothing that we did not know about each other. He was a terrific friend," he said.

Parameswaran said he was so disturbed after he heard about de Mello's death that he could not sleep the whole night.

The High Commissioner said such an incident should not have happened to UN personnel and the world body needs to be more careful with the security of its officers and premises.

Datuk Param Cumaraswamy, a former UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers said de Mello's death in the despicable and brutal bombing was certainly a serious blow to all what the UN stood for.

"De Mello was a man of principles and stickler for procedures and demanded accountability from his staff," he said.

When interviewed by the New Straits Times two years ago, de Mello then was busy establishing an Economic Planning Unit for East Timor - an idea proposed to him by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"When I visited Malaysia and held talks with Dr Mahathir, he advised me that merely dealing with emergencies peculiar to East Timor was insufficient."

"Dr Mahathir said there was a need for a department to carry out medium- and long-term programmes. I immediately latched on to the idea and will announce the appointment of the Economic Planning Unit chief soon so that development can be streamlined and all programmes are implemented

according to schedule," he had said.

Among his most prestigious achievements would be when he successfully took office in November 1999 in East Timor, which sustained large-scale damage by the turmoil after the direct ballot held in August of the same year.

Working as the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, de Mello led the UN mission and endeavour for the nation building towards the independence of East Timor at the time of difficulties up to its independence in May 2002.

This led him to receive the highest recognition from Japan last July for achieving independence in East Timor.

He joined the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva in 1969 and became assistant high commissioner. He served in Bangladesh when it won its independence from Pakistan in 1971 and in Cyprus following the 1974 Turkish invasion.

He spent three years in charge of refugees in Mozambique during the civil war that followed its independence from Portugal in 1975. He was political adviser to the UN peace-keepers in Lebanon from 1981 to 1983. The 1990's found him dealing with refugees and other humanitarian problems in Cambodia, in the former Yugoslavia as it broke apart, and in the war-torn Great Lakes region of Africa.