

August 20, 2003

Huge Suicide Blast Demolishes U.N. Headquarters in Baghdad; Top Aid Officials Among 17 Dead

By **DEXTER FILKINS** and **RICHARD A. OPPEL Jr.**

BAGHDAD, Iraq, Aug. 19 — A suicide bomber drove a gleaming new cement mixer full of explosives into the side of the United Nations compound here today and blew it up, killing 17 people and wounding at least 100 in an attack on one of the principal agencies in charge of rebuilding Iraq.

The bomb demolished the three-story converted hotel that served as the United Nations headquarters, scattering the wounded and the remains of the dead. United Nations employees, many of them recently flown in from Europe and the United States, crawled and ran from the wreckage, their clothes torn and splattered with blood. Many were delirious, calling out to friends and colleagues left in the rubble behind.

Among the dead was Sergio Vieira de Mello, 55, the United Nations secretary general's special representative in Iraq. Mr. Vieira de Mello's body was pulled from the wreckage tonight by American soldiers.

L. Paul Bremer III, the chief American civilian administrator here, said there were indications that Mr. Vieira de Mello had been the target of the attack. The truck bomb crashed into the compound just beneath Mr. Vieira de Mello's third-floor office.

The suicide bombing marked a brazen assault on the American occupation here, apparently calculated to destroy any sense of security for people charged with reviving Iraq in the aftermath of the war. If anarchy was the goal today, it was anarchy that unfolded.

Screams and moans rose from the dozens of bloodied United Nations workers who lay across the courtyard, as American soldiers yanked and pulled the living from ruins. Bodies lay about, some missing limbs, others covered with white sheets.

Susan Manuel, a United Nations spokeswoman, said the bombing marked the deadliest attack on the organization in its history. The attack came less than a month after the Security Council, relegated to a supporting role in Iraq, voted to endorse the American-backed Iraqi interim government.

Today, the Security Council resolved to redouble its efforts, as did President Bush, despite all attempts to force outsiders to quit the country.

Regardless of those declarations, the bombing seemed intended to intensify the guerrilla war under way against American soldiers, and to increase domestic political pressure on Mr. Bush, who faces growing unhappiness about the course of the American occupation.

The White House said tonight that Mr. Bush had called Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain to discuss the situation in Iraq and in the Middle East. Mr. Bush also called Brazil's president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, to express condolences over the death of Mr. Vieira de Mello, the White House said.

The dead also included Rick Hooper, the United Nations' chief expert on Arab affairs; Nadia Younes, Mr. Vieira de Mello's chief of staff; Ranillo Buenaventura, of the relief coordination office; Marilyn Manuel and Jean-Selim Kanaan, employees in Mr. Vieira de Mello's office; Chris Klein-Beckman, an official of Unicef; and Fiona Watson of Britain, who worked on the oil-for-food program.

A World Bank official in Washington said five of its employees were missing. Also missing was Arthur C. Helton, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, who was scheduled to meet with Mr. Vieira de Mello at the time of the bombing.

At a cordon set up by American soldiers, the families of the dead and wounded gathered, pushing and pleading for news. A woman with a United Nations tag around her neck stood shuddering and sobbing, alone.

"Things just started to fly," said Mahal al-Khatib, a secretary who sat on the edge of the courtyard, her face and body flecked with blood. "I heard an explosion and everything was upside down. I don't know, I don't know where they all are."

The compound attacked today was filled with hundreds of people responsible for an array of relief duties: repairing the country's electrical system, finding homes for refugees and delivering food. When the bomber crashed through the wall at 4:30 p.m., employees were holding a news conference to discuss their efforts to defuse the thousands of land mines buried across the country.

The attack came 12 days after a car bomb exploded outside the Jordanian Embassy on the other side of Baghdad, killing at least 17 people. No one has been charged in that attack.

Bernard B. Kerik, a former New York City police commissioner and a senior adviser to the Iraqi interim government, said the bomb used today appeared to be far larger than the one detonated Aug. 7 outside Jordan's embassy.

An American official close to the investigation said tonight that a pair of hands and feet, believed to be those of the person who drove the cement mixer into the compound, had been found 150 yards from the blast site, mixed with wreckage of the cement truck.

It was not immediately clear who carried out the attack, and speculation ranged across a wide spectrum of possibilities, from agents acting on behalf of Iraq's neighbors, Syria and Iran, to supporters of Saddam Hussein's former government.

But the immediate focus of attention was Ansar al-Islam, a militant Islamic group that American officials believe has been plotting attacks against Western targets in Baghdad. The group, which operated training camps in the mountainous region of northern Iraq, was attacked and dispersed by American forces during the war. Many of the group's fighters are believed to have fled to Iran.

Though it was unclear who undertook the attack, there was every indication that the target was chosen with care, and that the attack was carefully planned.

The compound that was attacked was not just the symbol in Iraq of the United Nations, which with its

weapons inspectors and oil-for-food program has been a dominant force in this country for the last 12 years. But the compound is also one of the least fortified of its kind here, with neither tanks nor troops to protect it.

Despite its troubles in Iraq, the Bush administration last week ruled out giving the United Nations a larger role in the occupation. Still, the organization had undertaken a number of aid projects, including a multimillion dollar program to help revive the country's electricity network.

After the bombing, American soldiers surrounded the compound and took over the rescue effort, evacuating the wounded by helicopter and others by truck.

Witnesses said they had seen a yellow cement mixer veer off the road in front of the compound, rumble through a parking lot and crash into a brick wall that surrounds the building, just yards from the exterior walls. The truck evidently penetrated the wall before it was detonated; afterward, the truck's twisted remains sat suspended midway through the wall.

"I was waiting for my friend outside the compound," said Fawzi al-Hamdani. "In the mirror, I saw a new cement mixer. It struck my eye because it was so new. He was driving quite fast."

Pandemonium reigned for hours at the scene. The families of victims scurried about, picking their way through barbed wire and piles of rubble, beseeching people for word of their loved ones.

At sunset, as the crowds began to disperse, an Iraqi woman sat on the ground, her arms wrapped around her knees. Her name was Tamea Ramli, and she had come to wait for her daughter, Fariyal, a 27-year-old booking clerk.

Some three hours after the bombing, Ms. Ramli had not yet seen her daughter. She said she was taking solace in a rumor that a group of survivors, unhurt, were still inside.

"I heard my daughter is in there," she said.