

Gaza crisis spotlights need to revitalise multilateral system: UN veteran Noeleen Heyzer

Joyce ZK Lim

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SINGAPORE – The United Nations remains crucial to the global framework of multilateral governance, but its efficacy has waned, making it “insufficient to ensure global peace and security”, said social scientist and former UN senior official Noeleen Heyzer.

The ongoing crisis in Gaza has highlighted the “great urgency to rebuild the functioning and credibility of the multilateral system”, Dr Heyzer said on Feb 27.

“The world’s failure to act swiftly and decisively to impose a ceasefire in Gaza, protect civilian lives and infrastructure, and prevent what the UN Secretary-General has called ‘a crisis of humanity’ and ‘a graveyard for children’ has shattered global confidence in the multilateral system,” she added.

The 76-year-old UN veteran was speaking at the launch of her book, *Singapore And Multilateral Governance: Securing Our Future*, at the National University of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

The book is a collection of lectures she delivered in 2021 for the Institute of Policy Studies after she was named the institute’s 10th S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan was the guest of honour at the book launch.

Dr Heyzer served as UN under-secretary-general from 2007 to 2015, and was the highest-ranking Singaporean in the UN system during her term.

More recently, she was the UN secretary-general’s special envoy on Myanmar from 2021 to 2023.

In January, the UN’s International Court of Justice ordered Israel to take all measures within its power to prevent acts of genocide, and to take immediate and effective measures to enable the provision of basic services and humanitarian assistance to address the adverse conditions faced by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

Even so, the humanitarian situation in Gaza remains dire. World Health Organisation chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on Feb 21 described the territory as a “death zone” with “inhumane” and deteriorating conditions.

Meanwhile, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Feb 26 described the humanitarian aid in Gaza as “still completely insufficient”.

Israel’s ongoing war in Gaza has claimed almost 30,000 Palestinian lives, say Gaza health authorities.

This came after Hamas attacked Israel on Oct 7, 2023, killing 1,200 people and taking 253 hostages by Israel’s count.

Dr Heyzer said that “we are watching international humanitarian law and human rights laws cast aside in the absence of a robust mechanism of enforcement”.

She added that the world could not afford to wait any longer to “restore faith in a rule-based world order that is now on life support”.

She called on all nations to work collectively to “rebuild a more effective and credible multilateral framework, starting with long-overdue reforms of some of its key institutions and rules to prevent future crises and devastation”.

Singapore And Multilateral Governance: Securing Our Future is available at \$46 (hard cover), \$28 (soft cover) and \$22 (e-book), inclusive of GST. To purchase, go to its publisher World Scientific at this website.