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Headline: S'porean appointed to top UN mediation panel

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A Singaporean has been named to a new top-level United Nations mediation panel at a time when the Rohingya refugee crisis is on the radar of the world body.

Former top UN official Noeleen Heyzer was appointed to the UN High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation on Sept 13. The 18-member group comprises current and former world leaders as well as experts.

It will advise UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and support specific mediation efforts around the world, the UN said in a recent statement.

It also said the establishment of the board is part of the "surge in diplomacy for peace", and is expected to let the UN "work more effectively with regional organisations, non-governmental groups and others involved in mediation".

Dr Heyzer, 69, a sociologist, was formerly undersecretary-general of the UN, executive secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and executive director of the UN Development Fund for Women. She is a distinguished fellow at the Singapore Management University and the Nanyang Technological University's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

When asked yesterday if the board would tackle the Rohingya refugee crisis, Dr Heyzer, who was on her way to New York for the UN General Assembly meetings this week, said the issue was definitely on the UN's agenda.

She added that there was a need to find a "political strategy" that would work for Myanmar's Rakhine state, where more than 400,000 Rohingya Muslims have been driven from their homes by the military into neighbouring Bangladesh.

She also said she was very pleased to be put in a position where she can draw on her past experiences and "try to help".

She said the "world is in definite need of mediation for peace", which should ideally resolve tensions before they escalate into conflicts.

"What we are seeing is our inability to handle these massive complex conflicts, which have led to the forced displacement of populations and that, in turn, has affected the politics and cohesion of societies," she added during the phone interview.

Other members of the board include former Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa, former Timor Leste president Jose Ramos Horta, Chile's President Michelle Bachelet and Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby.

RSIS executive deputy chairman Ong Keng Yong said Dr Heyzer's past experiences have left her with wide knowledge and contacts in both the economic and social arenas that she can bring to bear in her new role.

"There is the rich knowledge that she has, and it will help her to perform her role in this mediation group," he said.

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COMPLEX CONFLICTS

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DR NOELEEN HEYZER

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