



The Elders' Journey for Planetary Peace

2024 Miwon Peace Prize Award Ceremony

Acceptance Speech

Ban Ki-moon, Deputy Chair of *The Elders*, the 8th Secretary-General of the UN

November 29, 2024

Chancellor Inwon Choue of the Kyung Hee University System,
Madam Irina Bokova, Chair of the Selection Committee of the Miwon Peace Prize,
Professors and members of the Kyung Hee family,
Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a tremendous honour and privilege to be here this afternoon to accept this inaugural Miwon Peace Prize on behalf of The Elders.

Despite our name, The Elders is a relatively young organisation. We were founded 17 years ago by Nelson Mandela, so perhaps you could say we are now in our adolescent stage.

It feels appropriate therefore that our relatively new organisation is the first recipient of this entirely new prize.

As a Korean, it gives me great pride to see the deep affinities between the mission and values of The Elders and the philosophy of Miwon developed by Dr. Young Seek Choue.

The world envisioned by Miwon transcends the divisions imposed by ideologies and politics, seeking a new horizon of global governance where human dignity and universal values are paramount.

The founder of The Elders, Nelson Mandela, fought courageously for many decades and at great personal sacrifice to overcome racial discrimination in apartheid South Africa and champion the values of the universal human rights.

Nelson Mandela was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his remarkable accomplishments in South Africa, but his profound sense of solidarity and human empathy meant his influence was felt far beyond his country's borders.

He worked for peace across Africa, stood in support with the Palestinian people and campaigned for the victims of HIV/AIDS and other marginalised groups across the world.

This belief in equality and justice inspired him to found The Elders in 2007, on the occasion of his 89th birthday.

I had the honour of joining The Elders ten years later, in 2017, after I had stepped down as Secretary-General of the United Nations.

I was inspired then, and remain inspired today, by the words Nelson Mandela spoke at the first public convening of The Elders, in Johannesburg in July 2007:

“This group derives its strength not from political, economic or military power, but from the independence and integrity of those who are here.

They do not have careers to build, elections to win, constituencies to please. They can talk to anyone they please, and are free to follow paths they deem right, even if hugely unpopular.

They will support courage where there is fear, foster agreement where there is conflict and inspire hope where there is despair.”

Although the world has changed dramatically since Mandela founded The Elders, and even more so since Miwon first developed his philosophy, I believe that their shared commitment to peace and human rights for all has never been more important.

It is my sincere hope that the awarding of the inaugural Miwon Peace Prize to The Elders will help take the messages of both of our organisations and their founders to a wider global audience.

These messages need to be heard more than ever today, as our world is confronted by violent conflicts, deepening polarisation and geopolitical rivalry, and declining respect for the rule of law and the institutions created to preserve and promote peace.

We are witnessing a global explosion of conflicts, atrocity crimes and impunity, from Gaza to Ukraine, Sudan to Myanmar and countless other countries.

The foundations of the post-1945 international order are rotting through neglect, complacency and sabotage. The dysfunction and double standards we see as a result is exacerbating the profound lack of trust between countries, and a rise in violent conflicts.

This increasing chaos stems from violations of international law over many years, and paralysis within the decision-making bodies charged with preventing and resolving conflicts.

The pursuit of national objectives by military means rather than diplomacy is precisely the opposite of what the architects of the United Nations intended, and what most people in the world still want, which is the peaceful resolution of disputes.

The failure of states to uphold their responsibilities has created a vacuum which geopolitical rivalry and bellicose confrontation is filling. The five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council – the United States, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom – must shoulder a significant amount of the blame for this abdication of global leadership.

Repeated vetoes on the Security Council are an abuse of the position of permanent members, which is increasingly questioned in a multipolar world where other countries are playing a more constructive role.

As a former UN Secretary-General, it pains me to observe that the current system of international peace and security architecture is patently ineffective. It is failing to perform its most fundamental function: upholding peace and security, and protecting innocent lives.

There is perhaps no greater indictment of this failure than the growing number of children killed and impacted by armed conflict.

According to the most recent report by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, grave violations against children rose 21 percent in 2023, with a 35 percent rise in the killing and maiming of children in the same period.

This reflects a persistent and blatant disregard for international law by those perpetrating these violations, whether government forces or non-state armed actors, and a sense of impunity that they will not be held accountable for their actions.

There should be no impunity for those who commit crimes against children anywhere in the world, whether they be states or armed groups, in autocracies or democracies. Such distinctions mean nothing to the parents of murdered children, nor should they to the institutions charged with upholding international justice.

I know from my own experience that the trauma experienced by children in armed conflict cannot be captured in figures alone.

As a young boy during the Korean War, I experienced the trauma and wrenching displacement of fleeing my home during the conflict, with death and destruction all around me. The human suffering I witnessed as I fled my burning village with my parents continued to haunt me in the days and years to come.

No child should endure what I did as a boy, and what countless other boys and girls still do

today, from Gaza, Lebanon and Israel to Ukraine, Sudan to Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Yemen and beyond.

As someone who has championed women's rights and gender equality throughout my life and particularly as UN Secretary-General, I am hugely concerned at the continuously high levels of sexual violence against girls in conflicts worldwide.

These violations have devastating consequences, not only for survivors, their families and communities, but also for those children born of sexual violence who deserve special recognition and support.

All of us need to ask hard questions of our leaders as to how this state of affairs can continue in this day and age.

The case for reform is beyond doubt.

And indeed, in recent years we have seen a renewed urgency to long-standing efforts to reform the UN Security Council.

This culminated in a commitment at the Summit of the Future in September to enlarge the Council to reflect the world of today, not that of 1945, while ensuring a balance between representativeness and effectiveness.

The veto remains the core problem in the working methods of the Council, and new, indefinite, permanent members with veto privileges would only increase ineffectiveness and repeat the founding flaw of the Council.

The Elders are instead calling for a new category of longer term, re-electable membership on a regional basis, as some models have proposed. This would create positive and democratic incentives for longer term presence on the Council.

We welcome the commitment in the Pact for the Future to develop a consolidated model that balances these issues. A coalition of member states should drive a process that puts such a model to the General Assembly for its approval.

In the only successful reform of to date, Council expansion in the 1960s, it was the General Assembly, not the Security Council that led the process. In that reform, the five Permanent Members of Council eventually followed the global consensus, so we should not seek or wait for permission from them today.

This impasse is unforgivable when all of humanity is confronted with existential threats – the climate and nature crisis, pandemics, nuclear weapons and unregulated Artificial Intelligence –

that can only be addressed by countries defusing these geopolitical tensions and working together.

Next year marks the 80th anniversary of the United Nations. As a former Secretary-General, and as someone who celebrated my own 80th birthday this year, I view this as a landmark moment in world history.

Throughout my life, I have been a determined champion of multilateralism. In essence, this word represents collaboration, inclusion and solidarity. It asks us to look beyond state interests and recognise that we are all part of a shared, international community.

During my time as Secretary-General, I witnessed important victories for diplomacy and global justice when countries came together, despite their differences, to work towards common goals. The Paris Climate Agreement and Sustainable Development Goals, both agreed in 2015, represent two historic achievements that continue to shape policy decisions today.

But there can be no grounds for complacency in tackling the climate and nature crisis. It demands concerted, collective action that recognises the interconnectedness of the global economy and the intersections of injustice.

We share one solitary, fragile planet. We will all suffer the consequences of inaction. Yet political and business leaders struggle to put aside individual interests and act together. Even as climate and nature impacts grow ever more apparent, some people are actively turning against the actions needed to reduce risks. How can we break through this impasse?

I believe that the way forward starts with recognising that the search for justice is fundamental to our human condition. This includes justice in the distribution of wealth and opportunity, justice in access to decision-making, and justice in holding to account those who did most to cause the climate crisis, and the multiple conflicts that scar our world.

Multilateralism remains our greatest hope for averting catastrophe, safeguarding our collective future and delivering the just outcomes the world needs. This is why securing a functioning and effective rules-based multilateral system must be a priority for all member states of the United Nations.

We must remember that the UN was created after the devastation of the Second World War and the horrors of the Holocaust, by men and women determined to say “Never Again” to the barbarism they had experienced.

We must not give up on the multilateral frameworks that represent our greatest achievements, nor on the values enshrined in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Where necessary, we must enhance and reconfigure these frameworks to address our greatest

contemporary threats. The energy and enthusiasm of youth is vital to this, and is a critical counterpoint to the historical perspectives of older generations.

But looking at the state of the world today, I must say with regret that we are far from Miwon's vision of peaceful cooperation for the common good.

The outcomes of the recent G20 summit in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, and the COP29 climate conference in Baku, Azerbaijan, show that leaders are still not acting with sufficient urgency, ambition or coordination.

The \$300 billion per year committed by 2035 by rich countries at COP29 falls short of the amount needed to implement the Paris Agreement. This is nowhere near enough to support the developing countries that have not caused the climate crisis yet are experiencing its worst impacts.

COP29 was also weak on transitioning away from fossil fuels, which remains critical to any hope of reaching the targets in the Paris Agreement. But the green energy transition has gained unstoppable momentum, driven by competitive prices and market demand.

It is abundantly clear that the existential threats we face cannot be tackled by one country alone, and that even the strongest individual country will not prosper in the long term by pursuing an isolationist or entirely self-interested agenda.

International law must be applied universally. No country is above the law. But the double standards being displayed by some states, particularly the most powerful, weaken the credibility of global institutions charged with upholding the rule of law.

Russia's war on Ukraine remains an act of aggression against a sovereign state and a fundamental attack on the UN Charter with global ramifications. The Elders support the International Criminal Court's efforts to bring those responsible for war crimes to justice, and all efforts to ensure the leadership are held accountable for the crime of aggression.

The Elders also wholeheartedly support the ICC and the International Court of Justice in their work to hold Israel to account under international law for its actions over the last year in Gaza. Hamas must also be held accountable for its crimes and violations in the conflict.

We oppose any attempts to de-legitimise this work, and threats of punitive measures and sanctions against the ICC Prosecutor or other officials.

The rule of law must be applied consistently. Autocrats like to cite double standards in order to frame the universal values of human rights and international law enshrined in the UN Charter as hypocritical Western constructs. They are not, regardless of whether certain states display

hypocrisy or selectivity in when to champion them. They serve the interests of every country.

All leaders and citizens alike share the responsibility to reject a slide into disorder and anarchy, and restore the peaceful resolution of disputes through diplomacy and the rule of law.

For the past year, The Elders have been advocating for a new approach by heads of state and government, based on what we call “long-view leadership”.

Long-view leadership means showing the determination to resolve intractable problems not just manage them, the wisdom to make decisions based on scientific evidence and reason, and the humility to listen to all those affected. Long-view leaders must have the moral strength to address both current concerns and long-term risks, often at the expense of vested interests.

Such values should be common to all political leaders. But they are woefully missing in so many. We need leaders, women and men, who consistently demonstrate the courage to:

- Think beyond short-term political cycles and deliver solutions for both current and future generations.
- Recognise that enduring answers require compromise and collaboration for the good of the whole world.
- Show compassion for all people, designing sustainable policies which respect that everyone is born free and equal in dignity and rights.
- Uphold the international rule of law and accept that durable agreements require transparency and accountability.
- Commit to a vision of hope in humanity’s shared future, not play to its divided past.

To translate these principles into policy, leaders need to act in the interests of living and future generations, and cannot claim that the danger is hypothetical or too far in the future to merit attention now.

The impact of these existential threats is already being felt across the globe: a rapidly changing climate, a pandemic that killed millions and cost trillions and wars in which the use of nuclear weapons has been openly raised.

Last year saw growing global alarm at the out-of-control race to build increasingly powerful AI systems, without meaningful safeguards or oversight. Global temperature rises have exceeded the 1.5-degree threshold for the first time. Pandemic response approaches have fallen back into the cycle of panic and neglect that proved so devastating during Covid-19.

The demands of long-view leadership may sound Utopian but in fact they are rooted in recent political history. Similar steps have been taken before, and can be done so again if there is

sufficient political will.

For example, barely a decade after the first atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and with the Cold War already well entrenched, the United States, the Soviet Union and their respective allies agreed to establish the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The commitment of Cold War leaders to agree multilateral non-proliferation agreements like the NPT and the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention should be recalled by their counterparts today. Likewise, the efforts to secure the Montreal Protocol of 1987 and the rebuilding of the ozone layer demonstrate effective multilateral agreements can have an impact.

A similarly pioneering approach, rooted in universal values and the principles of transparent, accountable governance, is needed today to maximise the benefits and reduce the risks of Artificial Intelligence, which has the potential to radically change the very nature of human existence.

This is why the Elders are calling for continued leadership from the UN and member states to drive forward inclusive global governance of AI, following the Summit of the Future in September where the Global Digital Compact was adopted.

AI has the potential to bring great benefits to human life, including health, education and other aspects of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. However, without proper global governance, supported by meaningful and enforceable regulation, the extraordinary rate of technological progress in AI poses an existential threat to humanity, as well as more immediate risks.

The Elders applaud recent initiatives in AI governance at regional, national and sub-national levels, as well as convenings by governments, scientists and industry leaders. The AI safety summit series has brought welcome collaboration between the United States of America and China, as well as the proposal of an international network of AI Safety Institutes. These efforts are crucial to building and strengthening the legal and technical guardrails needed to keep this transformative technology safe and secure.

This diversity of approaches can provide vital insights and differing perspectives on AI governance. But there is an urgent need to harmonise these efforts. A coordinated approach will ensure that all nations participate in shaping the future of AI, not just those with advanced AI capabilities, that knowledge and expertise is shared, and governance decisions are based on the global public good.

Dear friends,

Our world stands at a precipice.

We can unite in defence of the values of the UN Charter; we can confront vested interests to tackle the climate and nature crisis before it is too late; and we can insist that conflicts are resolved fairly, with justice for victims and accountability for those who commit atrocity crimes.

Or we can abandon hard-won gains and surrender to the doctrine that “might is right”; we can continue to prioritise short-term profits over the long-term health of our planet; and we can let war criminals get away with horrific acts in the name of political expediency or cynical realpolitik.

Eighty years ago, the world had fallen off this precipice and was struggling to clamber back.

2025 marks the 80th anniversary of both the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the founding of the United Nations. The deadliest weapon the world has ever seen, and the birth of an institution designed to ensure that such a weapon would never have to be used again.

This strange symmetry represents the imperative of peace and diplomacy over conflict and catastrophe.

It is an imperative that has driven all my professional and public life. It is the imperative that led Nelson Mandela to found The Elders. And it is the imperative behind the Miwon Peace Prize.

The Elders are bound by Mandela’s mandate. The Miwon Prize gives fresh impetus, validation and responsibility to our mission.

We will not let you down.

Thank you.