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From left to right: President Tharman Shanmugaratnam presenting the Meritorious Service Medal to Dr Noeleen Heyzer, former under-secretary-general of the United Nations, and to Dr Sudha Nair, chief executive officer of Pave. President Tharman also presented the Order of Nila Utama to Mr Tan Gee Paw, former chairman of Changi Airport Group. The National Awards Investiture ceremony was held at ITE College Central on Nov 16. ST PHOTOS: LIM YAOHUI

First Singaporean to serve as UN under-sec-gen lauded at ceremony

She is one of 7,210 recognised with National Day Awards for contributions to Republic

Yap Wei Qiang
Correspondent

Growing up in a challenging environment did not break Dr Noeleen Heyzer. Instead, it ignited her desire to change her life and dedicate herself to removing barriers for others.

She eventually went on to become the first Singaporean and South-east Asian to serve as under-secretary-general of the UN.

Before that, she was the first person outside North America to lead the now-defunct UN Development Fund for Women (Unifem), which promoted gender equality and women's empowerment.

For her contributions in raising the international standing of Singapore, Dr Heyzer was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal, which she received from President Tharman Shanmugaratnam at the National Awards Investiture ceremony, held on Nov 16 at ITE College Central in Ang Mo Kio.

In a Facebook post, President Tharman said: "Noeleen's life has been one of courage and purpose", having lost her mother when she was six, grown up in a slum area along the Singapore River, and eventually being placed in the Mount Emily Girls' Home.

Referring to how she became "a leading advocate for the rights of girls and women around the world, ending violence against women, and peace-building", he said Dr Heyzer earned respect by connecting her leadership roles at the UN "with the realities of life of those who had long been ignored".

In his post, President Tharman also made special mention of another recipient of the Meritorious Service Medal – Dr Sudha Nair, chief executive officer of Pave, the first family violence specialist centre in Singapore.

Describing her as "an inspirational teacher and mentor to generations of young social workers", President Tharman said she has made ground-breaking contributions to social services, most especially as a pioneer in improving support for victims of domestic violence and advocating for stronger rules to protect them.

Dr Nair was also the first social worker to serve on the Council of Presidential Advisers and the Public Service Commission.

The other 10 recipients of the Meritorious Service Medal were Mrs Mildred Tan, Ms Euleen Goh, Ustaz Pasuni Maulan, Mr Davinder Singh, Mr Gerald Balendran Singham, Mr Tan Chong Meng, Mr Tan Tee How, Mr Chan Heng Kee, Mr Janadas Devan and Mr Hoong Wee Teck.

They were among 7,210 individuals recognised with the National Day Awards for their contributions to Singapore. Other recipients included Professor Laurence Glynn Williams, chairman of the Nuclear Safety Advisory Panel, who was one of 186 who received the Public Service Medal, in recognition of his near decade-long contribution to enhancing the country's nuclear safety capabilities.

Around 700 recipients attended the Nov 16 ceremony, including Mr Tan Gee Paw, former chairman of Changi Airport Group, who had chaired national water agency PUB for 16 years until he retired in 2017. He received the highest accolade of the 2025 National Awards – the Order of Nila Utama.

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