

When leaders flout the international rule of law, the poor pay the highest price

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Major powers are violating the international rule of law and systematically undermining multilateral institutions. The most vulnerable people are paying the highest price in terms of lives lost to conflict, and disruptions to vital food, fertiliser and energy supplies.

The aggression launched by the USA and Israel against Iran has plunged the Middle East into instability. Iran has long committed grave crimes against its own people, while its retaliatory blockade of the Strait of Hormuz – and Israel’s attacks against Lebanon – constitute further violations of international law.

The backdrop to today’s crisis is one of corrosive leadership decisions over many decades, from the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 to Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and Israel’s ongoing assault on Gaza and the West Bank.

The international order created in 1945 rested on a foundational commitment: that no state, however powerful, has the right to wage aggressive war or use force except in conformity with the UN Charter.

Today, this commitment is under sustained assault by the very powers who were supposed to be its guarantors.

Major powers invoke international law selectively against adversaries while disregarding it in their own conduct or that of their allies, including through the repeated use of the veto that is eroding the UN Security Council.

With every successive violation we drift further from the values and principles of the UN Charter. Others feel emboldened to violate laws and rights themselves, knowing that there is no credible global referee. Every failure to respond normalises the unacceptable.

The consequences are visceral: the girls killed when their school is bombed, the mothers raped in front of their children, the hospitals, health workers and journalists deliberately targeted by state forces, and the judges and lawyers intimidated and murdered into silence.

As we meet in Nairobi at the same time as African leaders, we are acutely aware of the horrific conflicts in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. All parties to these wars, including

Rwanda with its forces' incursion into the DRC, and the multiple foreign sponsors of the two sides in Sudan, are responsible for atrocities against civilians, including rampant sexual violence.

The scale of war crimes and suffering is outrageous. Leaders who believe in the rule of law must speak with one voice to insist that rights are respected, and those who abuse them are held to account.

International rule of law is not an abstraction. It is distilled from some of the bloodiest chapters of recent human history. It also underpins all our daily lives in countless unseen ways: our ability to travel, trade, use telecommunications networks and live in security and dignity.

All sectors of society thus have a responsibility to step up and defend the international rule of law, including politicians, multilateral institutions, business leaders, trade unions and civil society coalitions.

History teaches us that a world defined by "might is right" always ends in disaster.

As Presidents Xi and Trump meet, they and all leaders must act urgently to restore the primacy of the rule of law and protect one of humanity's greatest political achievements: peaceful coexistence governed by law rather than force.

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