There are still many challenges faced by seniors in Singapore, United Nations human rights expert Rosa Kornfeld-Matte said, even as she commended the country's Government for its efforts and commitment to ensure that older people fully enjoy their human rights.

“While I understand that many of the new programmes and policies to address the challenges faced by older persons will need more time to bear fruit, the reality on the ground indicates that life remains a struggle for many old Singaporeans,” Ms Kornfeld-Matte said in a statement released by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Regional Office for South-East Asia.

Ms Kornfeld-Matte visited Singapore at the invitation of the Singapore Government, and had earlier commended Singapore's policies for the elderly for being on the right track.
During her visit, she met Government officials, the private sector, non-profit and voluntary welfare organisations to understand their work in the area of population ageing and to exchange views on the challenges and opportunities that Singapore faces as a rapidly ageing society, said the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).

According to MFA, the UN expert was briefed on Singapore’s Action Plan for Successful Ageing, in areas including health and wellness, learning, employment, retirement adequacy, housing, transport, and protection for vulnerable seniors.

The Foreign Affairs Ministry said Ms Kornfeld-Matte commented positively on several aspects of Singapore's policies towards the elderly, including its whole-of-Government approach and its investment in research on ageing.

"We share Ms Kornfeld-Matte’s view about the need to strengthen our system to ensure that our plans to prepare for population ageing are sustained," MFA said in the statement last week.

"We affirmed our commitment to continue to take a whole-of-nation approach, plan long-term and invest consistently to build a Nation for All Ages. We will also study the best practices and programmes that she highlighted, including ways to provide more statistical information on the state of ageing in Singapore."

In the OHCHR statement on Tuesday, Ms Kornfeld-Matte reiterated her approval of the Singapore Government's "efforts and commitment to ensure that older persons fully enjoy their human rights" but said that she was "puzzled to learn that in a country with the third highest GDP per capita in the world, many older persons with low income continue to depend on their social
network for a significant portion of their livelihood and that many of those who lack such support systems face financial hardship".

She also expressed concern at reports about elder abuse, "particularly since reported cases tend to be just the tip of the iceberg".

**LAWS, POLICIES GROUNDED IN "HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH"

To address the needs of the ageing population, the Chilean academic suggested that Singapore implement "laws and policies grounded in a human rights-based approach".

“Further measures and independent mechanisms are urgently required to ensure that any form of violence against and abuse of older persons, including financial abuse, is detected and reported," she said.

“Efforts to upgrade the care system and social policy need to continue in order to put in place the necessary infrastructure, programmes and schemes to address the new demographic reality and the human rights concerns of an increased number of older persons,” she added.

While noting that many of the new measures are currently in their pilot phase or at a very early stage of implementation, Ms Kornfeld-Matte called on the Government to monitor the measures taken so far to fully assess their impact on the enjoyment of their human rights by older people at this stage.

She also said she "welcomed" Singapore's efforts to pioneer new models of care. “Care technology offers unpredicted opportunities in re-shaping care systems for older persons given that many existing care system are or will in the near future reach the limits of their capacities,” she commented.
OHCHR said a comprehensive report on Ms Kornfeld-Matte's findings and recommendations would be presented at a forthcoming UN Human Rights Council session.

Last term, our Sec 3 students went for their level camp which included their VIA project with the elderly from Ren Ci hospital. Let's read more on their reflections and thoughts after going through the VIA project.

3/1: The overall experience was a meaningful one. We get to put ourselves in the elderly’s shoes and feel their struggles during the one hour of stimulation. When the elderly came, we had to be patient as it takes quite a while to understand what they were saying or doing as they old and not as strong as they used to be.

3/2: We really looked forward to the VIA Project since it was announced. The different abled elderly for Ren Ci came to our school. Our 'buddy' was a very good Football player. He wasn't able to hold things properly and needed help in almost everything. Even saying a simple hello with a smile can make their day! It was indeed a very fulfilling experience.
3/3: At first, we were very nervous to meet the elderly. It was indeed awkward initially but as we got to interact with them, slowly, things turned out to be meaningful and not like what we expected it to be. It was an enjoyable moment with the elderly as we get to play different kinds of activities and games. We were happy to see the elderly smiling at the end of the VIA.

3/4: From this experience, I get to know that the elderly are indeed friendly and kind. The VIA activity also taught us to be more gentle to the elderly as they are sensitive and fragile. We have learnt not to take the elderly for granted as they are actually people who are rich with experiences and life-lessons.

3/5: We can see that the elderly from Ren Ci hospital were having fun and they were happy to see us. It was fun for both students and the elderly as there were games and skit to enjoy. We learnt to communicate well with the elderly which leaves us feeling sad at the end of the activity when we had to separate with them.
BANGKOK: The clock is ticking for Bangkok. Before it turns 250 years old in 2032, the city could have sunk under water.

Although the problem has been developing for years, with doomsday warnings from academics and researchers, little action has been taken. Many members of the public seem oblivious to the risks and officials cannot settle on a strategy.

Bangkok is sitting on a low-lying flood plain that was once marshland. Photo by Pichayada Promchertchoo.

“The problem is slow and silent. Many people don’t believe Bangkok will ever be under water. Some think others will take care of it. And that’s a dangerous thought,” said Ponlawat Buasri, a Thai architect who rose to fame after designing Wetropolis, a flood-resistant community that could provide a blueprint for Bangkok to keep its head above water.

Under his vision, low-lying communities would be shrunk and then elevated 5 metres above water, avoiding the problems of flooding, rising sea levels and land subsidence. Underneath, restored mangrove forests would absorb carbon dioxide, filter water and provide residents with green open space, as the community thrives without fear of being submerged.
While the design is arguably not wholly practical for a massive city like Bangkok, it hit the headlines when it came out in 2011 - the same year Thailand was inundated by one of the worst floods in its history. More than 800 people were killed and 12 million others affected. Bangkok remained underwater for months and the Thai economy suffered a US$40.7 billion loss.

Since then, the floods have subsided, apparently along with interest in developing a solution to a problem that is not going to go away.

“Not so many people think it’s a huge problem. They believe someone will find a solution. But have they ever thought how long our flood defence systems can last or if the city would last forever?” Ponlawat said.

But experts say action is needed – and soon.

**A SINKING TRUTH**

Bangkok is facing a double whammy of challenges.

By the end of this century, the mean sea level is predicted to rise by almost one metre, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

And while the waters rise, the city is relentlessly sinking further, accelerating the process of living space disappearing.
Every year, Bangkok sinks 1-2 centimetres.

Photo by Pichayada Promchertchoo

Currently, Bangkok is only 0.5-2 metres above the water. The metropolitan area is sitting precariously on what was once marshland. That means the city is resting on a layer of soft clay that is highly compressible. Besides the natural land subsidence, decades of excessive groundwater pumping and rapid development have put more pressure on the foundation. Nearly 5,000 tall buildings, nine million vehicles, roads and rail systems have contributed to the problem.

A study by Thailand’s National Reform Council in 2015 showed Bangkok risks being submerged in less than 15 years.

“Much of Bangkok is already lower than the sea level. Every year, it sinks by 1-2 centimetres, and some areas by even more. But that doesn’t mean Bangkok is submerged,” said Dr Anond Snidvongs from Geo-Informatics and Space Technology.
Development Agency (GISTDA), a governmental organisation that monitors floods and land subsidence in Thailand. “There are mechanisms that can help prevent that.”

However, while there are solutions that can help stem the decline, implementing them brings other problems, such as who will pay and what is the fallout outside Bangkok?

“To protect Bangkok from being submerged, there are costs. Costs aren't just financial but also the impact on other provinces. Floodwater has to go somewhere. So what are we going to do with affected people? And will everyone in Thailand bear the costs or just Bangkokians?” said Dr Anond.

GROW SMARTLY

The irony is that Bangkok would benefit from more water, if it could be diverted to the right place. The clay on which the city sits needs to retain moisture, otherwise it dries out, becoming more susceptible to subsidence. This results in the city sinking faster.

Groundwater is needed to allow the clay to retain its supportive qualities, but Bangkok’s heavily concreted urban sprawl prevents it from seeping through to the right areas. Instead, it floods the city or flows through to rivers and canals, putting further pressure on rising water levels.

“So you have to fix the problem there because water flows through layers of soil. We have to refill the right place,” said Dr Royol Chitradon, a water expert and director of the Hydro and Agro Informatics Institute (HAII).

Already, efforts have been made to rescue the sinking capital, including a law on groundwater pumping. In Bangkok, it is prohibited to extract groundwater without permission from the Groundwater Resources Department, except areas where water supply is not available.
Landowners are encouraged to install rainwater tanks in exchange for benefits for their construction.

Deputy Permanent Secretary of the BMA Kriengpol Padhanarath said that such simple measures can be helpful: "If the land owner can install a rainwater tank that can store 1 cubic metre of rainwater or more, he'll be able to construct a building that is larger than what is required by the law."
Much of Bangkok’s surface is covered in concrete, making it difficult for rainwater to travel underground. (Photo: Pichayada Promchertchoo)

But according to some analysts, such strategies present fundamental risks, because they are not permanent solutions to the problems that Bangkok faces. And, some say, they create even more problems because new construction puts more pressure on the city’s clay support and adds more barriers to groundwater seeping through to where it is needed.

**TAKE LESS, GIVE MORE**

As such, for Bangkok to survive, a total rethink may be needed. Which is why the designer of Wetropolis is hopeful that his ideas, or other radical suggestions, could gain momentum.

“Wetropolis reminds people that Bangkok is located on problems. It won’t be submerged all of a sudden but it will begin to malfunction little by little. One day, when we can’t repair it anymore, we’ll realise we have a problem but won’t know how to deal with it,” Ponlawat said.

If action is not taken, the inevitable will happen.

“One day Bangkok will be under water.”

**Sources:**