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UN agency launches campaign to highlight global statelessness problem



Born stateless, this baby acquired nationality in 2008 in Bangladesh

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The United Nations refugee agency today launched a campaign to highlight the plight of up to 12 million stateless people worldwide who are denied basic rights, including access to jobs, housing, education and health care by dint of their lack of citizenship.

The stateless may also not be able to own property, open bank accounts, get married legally, or register the birth of a child. Some face long periods of detention because they cannot prove their

identity or domicile, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)) said in a [press release](#).

“These people are in desperate need of help because they live in a nightmarish legal limbo,” said António Guterres, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, launched the campaign, five days ahead of the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, which will be marked on 30 August.

“This makes them some of the most excluded people in the world. Apart from the misery caused to the people themselves, the effect of marginalizing whole groups of people across generations creates great stress in the societies they live in and is sometimes a source of conflict,” said Mr. Guterres.

Although UNHCR puts the number of stateless people roughly at 12 million globally, an exact figure has been difficult to compile. Inconsistent reporting and different definitions of statelessness has meant that the true scale of the problem remains elusive.

The agency has decided to raise awareness on the international legal definition, while improving its own methods for gathering data on stateless populations.

The problem is particularly acute in South-East Asia, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, but pockets of statelessness exist throughout the world, according to UNHCR.

State secession carries a risk that some people will be excluded from citizenship if those issues are not considered early on in the process of separation. The world welcomed South Sudan as a new State last month, but it remains to be seen how new citizenship laws in both the north and south will be implemented, the agency pointed out.

“The dissolution of States, formation of new States, transfer of territories and redrawing of boundaries were major causes of statelessness over the past two decades,” said Mark Manly, the head of the statelessness unit at UNHCR. “Unless new laws were carefully drafted, many people were left out.”

In the 1990s, the break-up of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia left hundreds of thousands throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia stateless, with marginalized ethnic and social groups bearing the brunt of the exclusion.

While most cases of statelessness have been resolved in those regions, tens of thousands of persons remain stateless or at risk of statelessness.

An unfortunate consequence of statelessness is the fact that it can be self-perpetuating, according to UNHCR. In most cases when the parents are stateless, their children are stateless from the moment they are born. As a result the destitution and the exclusion of statelessness are visited upon yet another generation.

Discrimination against women compounds the problem as they remain the group most vulnerable to statelessness. According to UNHCR analysis, at least 30 countries maintain citizenship laws that discriminate against women.

There is, however, a growing trend for States to take action to remedy gender inequality in citizenship laws. Egypt, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Kenya and Tunisia have amended their laws to grant women equal rights as men to retain their nationality and pass their nationality to their children, UNHCR pointed out.

Another underlying theme of most stateless situations is ethnic and racial discrimination that leads to exclusion, where political will is often lacking to resolve the problem, the UN agency said.

Groups excluded from citizenship since States gained independence or were established include the Muslim residents (Rohingya) of northern Rakhine state in Myanmar, some hill tribes in Thailand and the Bidoon in the Gulf countries.

While most Roma do have citizenship of the countries where they live, thousands continue to be stateless in various countries of Europe, UNHCR added.

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