



BUREAU OF POPULATION, REFUGEES, AND MIGRATION



STATELESSNESS: A HIDDEN CRISIS

RIGHT TO NATIONALITY

Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “everyone has the right to a nationality” and should not be deprived arbitrarily of his or her nationality. Yet, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) counted over 6.5 million stateless persons at the end of 2009, and estimated the actual number may be as high as 12 million. Stateless people live in every region of the world, but remain largely “hidden” without government recognition. They include the Roma in Europe, Rohingya in Burma, many Palestinians, Bidoon in Kuwait and other countries, denationalized Kurds in Syria, and persons of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic.

WAYS TO ADDRESS STATELESSNESS

Identify and raise awareness of stateless populations.

Ensure universal birth registration and access to other forms of civil documentation.

Increase access to naturalization and citizenship:

- Eliminate discrimination in nationality laws
- Build administrative capacity for civil registry

CAUSES OF STATELESSNESS

- Failure to register newborns properly due to lack of administrative ability, cost, or traditional attitudes about birth registration.
- Birth to stateless parents.
- Political change and transfer of territory, which may alter the nationality status of citizens of the former state(s).
- Administrative oversights, procedural problems, conflicts of law between two countries, or destruction of official records.
- Targeted discrimination against minorities.
- Laws restricting acquisition of citizenship.
- Laws restricting the rights of women to pass on their nationality to their children.
- Laws relating to children born out of wedlock and during transit.
- Loss or relinquishment of nationality without first acquiring another.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE STATELESS?

A stateless person is someone who, under national laws, does not enjoy citizenship – the legal bond between a government and an individual – in any country. While some people are *de jure* or legally stateless persons (meaning they are not recognized as citizens under the laws of any state), many people are *de facto* or effectively stateless persons (meaning they are not recognized as citizens by any state even if they have a claim to citizenship under the laws of one of more states).

Without citizenship, stateless people have no legal protection. They have no right to vote and they often lack access to education, employment, health care, registration of birth, marriage or death, and property. Stateless people may also encounter travel restrictions, social exclusion, and heightened vulnerability to trafficking, sexual and physical violence, exploitation, forced displacement, and other abuses.

THE U.S. RESPONSE TO STATELESSNESS

Statelessness is an important human rights issue. The Department of State provides humanitarian assistance and engages in diplomacy to prevent and resolve statelessness. The United States is the single largest donor to UNHCR, the agency mandated to protect stateless people. The Department advocates on behalf of stateless people with foreign governments and civil society organizations, and conducts field monitoring of the conditions and challenges that stateless people encounter.

The U.S. government accepts stateless refugees for permanent resettlement in the United States through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, so they can enjoy a new life with full rights. Like all refugees resettled in the United States, they eventually have the opportunity to apply for U.S. citizenship. For stateless refugees, this is the realization of a simple right - nationality.