

45th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme,

23 – 24 June 2009, Room XIX, Palais des Nations, Geneva

Introductory statement by George Okoth-Obbo, Director, Division of International Protection Services, for item 3(b) "Report on Statelessness"

Madame Chairperson

Distinguished delegates

Ladies and Gentlemen.

The report contained in document EC/60/SC/CRP.10 covers activities in the field of statelessness that UNHCR has carried out since June 2005, the date of its last update to the Executive Committee. In 2005, the Office was working within the agency itself, with the Executive Committee, States and other Stakeholders in fashioning a framework for more systematically implementing its mandate on statelessness, an important result of which was Conclusion Nr 106 on statelessness. On the basis of that Conclusion, other tools that the Office had or continued to develop, the strong support and leadership provided by the High Commissioner personally and the support likewise by external stakeholders, UNHCR has over the last four years moved further forward on this part of its mandate with greater vision, purpose and institutional organization. The progress report summarizes the activities the Office has carried out since then both from its Headquarters here in Geneva through a small but determined Statelessness Unit headed by my colleague here Mr Mark Manly and through its Field operations. Activities for the development of international legal standards; the identification and prevention of statelessness and protecting stateless persons; raising awareness; and partnership (including with NGOs and UN system agencies most notably OHCHR, UNICEF and UNFPA) are described and concrete achievements on the ground highlighted in the report. These include the better and clearer data which has been established on the prevalence of the problem, up from reporting on populations in 33 states in 2005 to reporting now on 58; civil registration of individuals where there are heightened risks of statelessness with a view to mitigating or reducing those risks; the actual acquisition of citizenship certificates through, for instance, naturalization programmes; legal reforms to prevent statelessness; and advocacy, awareness and promotional campaigns which have meant that there are now 35 States that have acceded to the 1961 Convention on the prevention and reduction of statelessness, up from 29 in 2005; and 63 to the 1954 Convention relating to the status of Stateless Persons, up from 57 four years ago.

We are pleased to share these achievements with you but have also highlighted the internal and external challenges which remain to be addressed. We look forward to the Executive Committee joining us in an exchange of views on these challenges and on the ways to address them.

First of all, whereas UNHCR Field Operations that are actually engaging with the issue has increased significantly in number, there are important statelessness situations with which the Office still has no operational involvement. This is partly because of the Office's own resource constraints, for instance the greater and more comprehensive understanding which still has to be built up among staff around the issue of statelessness and limitations in staff capacity to respond to the extant situations. The Office is developing and implementing a number of tools and staff training programmes including a forthcoming Self-Study Training Module on Statelessness, and the new budget structure which has a specific pillar on statelessness should help illuminate, prioritize and support dedicated resource prioritization, allocation and mobilization.

In the external environment, a related challenge is that awareness of the problems of statelessness continues to lag far behind. In many a situation, there is no political will to address the problem, creating sensitivity in the way in which the Office must then discharge its responsibilities, for instance even only to survey the problems and develop baseline information. In others, there are capacity constraints in terms of policy and legal frameworks, institutional mechanisms and human resources. The Office will continue to build up its dialogue and cooperation with the concerned states to both open and expand space for humanitarian action on the issue, including accession to the international legal instruments, legal, policy, institutional and operational capacity. A number of regional meetings with Governments will be held inter alia to exchange best practices on identification, prevention and response.

The support of the Executive Committee and UNHCR's donors will continue to be vital. I should underline that all the achievements referred to earlier have been made on what can only be considered a shoe-string budget. The expected increased work on statelessness will require a corresponding increase in budget, even a significant one. UNHCR will ensure that donor states are apprised of UNHCR's activities under the statelessness pillar of the budget structure. With your support, I am optimistic that based on the changes noted in the Progress Report, the trend towards more pro-active UNHCR responses will continue and that the Office will have significantly more to report in 2011.

Thank you.