

### PRESS ADVISORY

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## **MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE ON STATELESSNESS IN WEST AFRICA FROM 23 TO 25 FEBRUARY IN ABIDJAN, COTE D'IVOIRE**

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**The invisible stateless people in West Africa: Foreigners everywhere, nationals nowhere.**

Dear colleagues,

On 23-25 February 2015 in Abidjan, the Government of Côte d'Ivoire and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) will host jointly with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) the first Ministerial Conference on Statelessness in West Africa.

Of the 10 million people who are stateless or at risk of statelessness in the world, at least 750,000 live in West Africa. This figure is just an estimate, there are many groups of people who could be stateless or at risk of statelessness that have not yet been evaluated. These individuals are typically in this situation because they have difficulties proving they possess links to a State due, for instance, to a lack of birth registration and personal documentation that traces their origins and could confirm their identity. Populations without birth certificates, abandoned children, undocumented stranded migrants, and individuals living in areas of state succession and border disputes constitute some of the major groups of people at risk of statelessness in West Africa.

Stateless people are denied a nationality and are deprived of their basic human rights. Forced to live in the shadows, they cannot go to school, see a doctor, get a job, open a bank account, buy a house, vote or get legally married, among many other obstacles. This situation can be perpetuated from generation to generation, putting large groups of people at risk of being stateless. This serious problem not only affects individuals, but also has severe consequences for the development of a country and the stability of the region.

In November 2014 UNHCR launched a Global Campaign to End Statelessness within 10 years, which includes an Action Plan to resolve existing cases of statelessness and prevent new ones from arising. The Ministerial Conference in Abidjan is key to addressing statelessness in the West African region. By hosting this event – a first of its kind on the African continent – UNHCR aims to promote a comprehensive regional strategy to identify stateless people, design protection measures, and develop concrete solutions to prevent and reduce

statelessness throughout the region. At the closing of the conference, all ECOWAS member States are expected to sign a declaration on the right to nationality and publicly express their commitment to ending statelessness in the near future.

The Ministerial Conference, scheduled for 25 February, will be preceded by two days of high-level technical debates among experts in the field of nationality and statelessness who will come up with concrete recommendations to prevent, reduce and resolve statelessness in West Africa.

The President of Cote d'Ivoire, H.E. Mr. Alassane Ouattara, will inaugurate the Conference, which will be attended by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Justice and the Interior from around the region whose portfolios all touch in some way or other on the issue of statelessness. UNHCR's High Commissioner, Mr. António Guterres, will also be present, in addition to high-level representatives from key regional organizations such as the ECOWAS Commission, the African Union, the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the Mano River Union. Civil society organizations, national human rights institutions, United Nations agencies, international experts, and diplomatic representatives from across West Africa are also invited to discuss this important topic.

To know more about the Ministerial Conference and about statelessness in West Africa, see:

<http://unhcr.org/ecowas2015>

<http://kora.unhcr.org/statelessness-west-africa/>

<http://kora.unhcr.org/statelessness-west-africa-just-feels-exist/>

[http://issuu.com/unhcrinwestafrica/docs/statelessness\\_in\\_west\\_africa](http://issuu.com/unhcrinwestafrica/docs/statelessness_in_west_africa)

<http://ibelong.unhcr.org>

<http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c155.html>

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