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**UNHCR News**

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**UNHCR lauds the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand among ASEAN States to address statelessness**

The UN Refugee Agency has welcomed the progress made by the Governments of Indonesia and the Philippines to confirm the nationality of nearly 3,000 people of Indonesian descent living in the southern Philippines. This is one of a series of positive steps taken by ASEAN States since the launch of a global campaign to end statelessness by 2024.

Volker Türk, UNHCR's Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, made these comments at a Jakarta panel discussion today titled "The Right to Nationality and Ending Statelessness in ASEAN".

"Since UNHCR launched the [#IBelong campaign](#) 2 years ago, ASEAN Member States have made real and quantifiable progress in addressing statelessness, with tens of thousands of stateless persons acquiring nationality and new policy commitments and initiatives made to further the goal of ending statelessness," said Türk. "The cooperation between Indonesia and the Philippines is a good example of how States can work together to resolve this global problem."

By definition, stateless people are not considered nationals by any State. As a result they often face problems accessing their basic rights and services and being fully integrated into society. Current statistics cover 3.7 million stateless people in 78 countries, while UNHCR estimates that at least 10 million people globally could be stateless.

According to reported statistics at the end of 2015, some 40 per cent of the world's stateless people – more than 1.4 million – were living in South-East Asia. This included affected populations in Myanmar (an estimated 938,000, not counting those who are internally displaced), Thailand (443,862), Brunei (20,524), Malaysia (11,689), Viet Nam (an estimated 11,000) and the Philippines (7,138).

The causes of statelessness varies across countries. Gaps or conflicts in nationality laws is a key cause, often preventing children from realising their right to a nationality. In some States discrimination in nationality laws can cause statelessness, for example when women are unable to transmit their nationality to children. In other cases the lack of birth registration and resulting difficulties in acquiring identity documentation over generations prevents people and communities from being able to show that they are entitled to nationality under the law. However, as statelessness is a man-made problem, it can be solved.

In recent years, governments in the region have taken concrete steps to try and reduce and prevent statelessness. So far this year, a joint undertaking by Indonesia and the Philippines has confirmed the nationality of 2,957 people of Indonesian

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descent – including 1,226 children – living in Southern Mindanao. This means that they can finally enjoy the rights and benefits of having a nationality.

Thailand, which is part of the “Friends of the Campaign to end Statelessness” group of countries, has adopted the goal of attaining zero statelessness. Concerted efforts have helped more than 23,000 stateless people to acquire Thai nationality in the last four years.

In addition, the Royal Thai Government this year requested all districts in the country to identify and issue legal status to eligible stateless students in its database – a move that could benefit up to 65,000 students, alongside the clarification of procedures to facilitate processing of applications by stateless persons. In September the authorities also introduced a special regulation on the Immigration Act to extend stateless people’s freedom of movement from the district where they live to the entire province, which could improve their access to rights and services like health care and education, further facilitating their integration into Thai society.

UNHCR is supporting NGO Adventist Relief and Development Agency (ADRA) to open “service points” in different schools in northern Thailand’s Chiang Rai province where stateless students and their families can obtain nationality-related information and eventually lodge applications for birth registration, nationality, permanent residency and related civil status documentation.

The project helped Manee, 39, a single mother with two daughters from the Lahu “hill tribe”, to attain Thai nationality last month. “I have peace of mind and will keep my Thai nationality card with me from now on,” she said. “I can exercise more rights, and I will vote in every election I can. I can also move freely to see my cousins if I want to. And I can finally take advantage of the public services that will also be beneficial for my children.”

In Malaysia, civil society is playing a crucial role in engaging the affected community and resolving documentation issues. More than 700 stateless people have been granted Malaysian nationality so far this year with the help of UNHCR’s partner, the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (DHRRA). UNHCR is also working to raise awareness amongst children, teachers, students and lecturers through teaching toolkits and university workshops, and supporting NGO campaigns such as the “Journey to Belong” social media platform and the “Bring to Light/stateless children” campaign.

UNHCR welcomes the new partnerships that are being formed. Children will be the focus of the Coalition on Every Child’s Right to a Nationality, a joint UNHCR-UNICEF-civil society initiative to be launched on December 8 at the UNHCR High Commissioner’s Protection Dialogue on “Children on the Move” in Geneva.

“In our work across East Asia and the Pacific, we see that children who are denied a nationality are also denied their most basic rights,” said UNICEF Regional Child Protection Adviser Stephen Blight. “Statelessness pushes children into a lifetime of marginalization and vulnerability, which is perpetuated across generations. Birth

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registration is a vital tool to protect against this and close the equity gap – it is fundamental to address and challenge statelessness among children."

The importance of preventing statelessness through birth registration was recognized in a Ministerial Declaration adopted by 44 States across the Asia Pacific in November 2014. States signed up to the goal of universal civil registration and vital statistics systems by 2024 and to address gaps in civil registration coverage for hard-to-reach and marginalized groups, including stateless persons. The Sustainable Development Goals, which provide the framework for global development, recognize the importance that no one is left behind, including in achieving legal identity for all, including birth registration by 2030.

At the regional level, the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) agreed in October to include a project on the right to a nationality for women and children and the building of the ASEAN Community in its 2016-2020 Workplan. This will build on a series of regional workshops and consultations co-hosted by Viet Nam's Representatives to the Commission and UNHCR which began in 2013.

"The ACWC project will provide a new platform for ASEAN countries to identify and share good practices, learn from their peers and strengthen national and regional capacity to further realise the right to a nationality for ASEAN's women and children. These efforts can contribute to realizing the ASEAN Community Vision 2025," said Her Excellency, Madame Lily Purba, Indonesia's Representative for Women's Rights and the Chair of the ACWC.

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