

# 5 things to know about STATELESSNESS

Imagine not being able to open a bank account. Buy a SIM-card for your phone. Go to school. Get married. Own your own home. This is the harsh reality for millions of people worldwide. They are not considered as nationals by any State. **They are stateless.**

## HOW DO PEOPLE BECOME STATELESS?

Statelessness is caused by a number of factors such as discrimination in nationality laws e.g. based on gender, race or religion as well as conflict between and gaps in nationality laws and State succession. Being undocumented is not the same as being stateless, but lack of birth registration can put people at risk of statelessness as a birth certificate provides proof of place of birth and parents – key information to establish a nationality. Statelessness can also arise in situations of displacement, changes in borders and emergence of new states, e.g. when some groups, particularly minorities, can have challenges in proving their link to the country.

## HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE STATELESS – AND WHERE DO THEY LIVE?

4.2 million people were registered as stateless by 76 countries in 2019, but UNHCR believes the actual number to be significantly higher. The global data remains a challenge, given that stateless people often live in precarious situations on the margins of society. Although statelessness may in many contexts be a hidden problem, stateless people are found in all regions of the world, and the majority were born in the countries in which they have lived their entire lives. Countries with notably large stateless populations include Myanmar, Kuwait, Cote d'Ivoire, Thailand and Iraq. In Europe alone, hundreds of thousands of people are stateless, primarily as a result of the dissolution of former states.

## WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF STATELESSNESS?

Without any nationality or ID-papers, stateless persons are often denied the basic rights and services that citizens enjoy. Statelessness can affect socio-economic rights such as education, employment, social welfare and healthcare as well as civil and political rights such as freedom of movement, freedom from arbitrary detention and political participation. Stateless people are consequently excluded from the societies they live in – and the result are entire communities and population groups that are alienated and marginalized. In the worst cases, statelessness can lead to conflict and cause displacement.

## WHAT IS THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK TO ADDRESS STATELESSNESS?

States set the rules for acquisition, change and loss of nationality as part of their sovereign power, but at the same time States obligated by general principles of law and the international treaties to which they are party. The two relevant international treaties on statelessness are the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. The first is the cornerstone in international protection for stateless persons, as it provides the definition of statelessness and establishes minimum standards and rights of stateless people. The latter requires States to establish safeguards in their legislation to address statelessness occurring at birth or later and to prevent statelessness.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT STATELESSNESS?

UNHCR is mandated by the UN General Assembly to identify and protect stateless people and to prevent and reduce statelessness. By working with governments, other UN agencies and civil society UNHCR works to address the problem. In 2014, UNHCR launched the #IBelong Campaign – a 10-year global action plan to end statelessness by 2024. Since the launch, numerous positive developments can be reported: More than 341,000 stateless people have acquired a nationality; thousands of children have been issued birth certificates; there have been 25 accessions to the UN Statelessness Conventions; and a number of States have introduced important law amendments. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go, and UNHCR is urging States and other stakeholders to strengthen the efforts to end statelessness. In 2016, UNHCR and UNICEF co-launched the Coalition on Every Child's Right to a Nationality. Since then, UNHCR and UNICEF have developed and are implementing joint strategies to address childhood statelessness in 20 countries.

**#IBELONG** The Campaign to End  
Statelessness by 2024

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