



Spotlight on a Hidden Problem: Statelessness

Stateless people are among the least visible but most vulnerable populations in the world. Sometimes described as “legal ghosts” or “the ultimate forgotten people,” they are not recognized as citizens by any government. Without citizenship, stateless people may have inadequate or no legal protection, no right to vote, and often lack access to education, employment, health care, marriage and birth registration, and property rights. Stateless people may also encounter travel restrictions, social exclusion, sexual and physical violence, exploitation, forcible displacement (including trafficking in persons), and other abuses. Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to a nationality and should not be arbitrarily deprived of nationality, an estimated 15 million people remain stateless (*de jure* or *de facto*) around the world.

The U.S. Commitment

The United States Government considers statelessness to be an important humanitarian and human rights concern. Under the leadership of Assistant Secretary Ellen Sauerbrey, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) has made addressing statelessness a priority as part of the President's commitment to champion human dignity.

Through humanitarian diplomacy and assistance, PRM is increasing its support for stateless populations. The U.S. is the single largest donor to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the agency mandated to protect stateless people. PRM played a key role in the development and adoption in October 2006 of the UNHCR Executive Committee's Conclusion on Identification, Prevention and Reduction of Statelessness and Protection of Stateless Persons.

PRM funding supports protection and assistance programs for stateless populations primarily through contributions to UNHCR's annual budget, as well as targeted programs. PRM recently contributed \$689,000 to a UNHCR program to issue temporary registration certificates for 150,000 among the 670,000 stateless Rohingya in Burma's Northern Rakhine State, which made them eligible for services, and to construct or rehabilitate 10 schools benefiting this vulnerable population.

By working with key partners in the international community, PRM leads U.S. efforts to:

- prevent people from becoming stateless;
- identify those who are stateless;
- protect stateless people from discrimination and other abuses; and
- advocate for durable solutions through naturalization and birth registration, and other measures to increase access to citizenship.

Working with U.S. Embassies and others in the Department of State, PRM is engaged in bilateral discussions with governments hosting stateless persons to seek solutions to their plight.

In February 2007, Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey visited Vietnam, where nearly 10,000 people who escaped Cambodia's Khmer Rouge regime in the late 1970s remain stateless. In meetings with high-level government officials in Vietnam and Cambodia, she urged both countries to think creatively and work with UNHCR to grant citizenship to this population.

PRM also works closely with members of Congress and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to raise awareness about statelessness, and to identify models of success or best practices in achieving

solutions for stateless populations. Beginning in 2007, the State Department will include the issue of statelessness as a distinct sub-section in its annual country Human Rights Reports. Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey testified in February 2007 before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus and the Congressional Children's Caucus on the issue of statelessness.

The United States also accepts stateless refugees for permanent resettlement in the United States through the refugee admissions program. Recently, the U.S. Government offered to accept for admission the long-



standing Bhutanese refugee population in Nepal who were rendered stateless by the actions of the Bhutanese government.

To date, 10,000 Meskhetian Turks from Russia, including some 5,000 stateless individuals, have chosen to be resettled in the U.S. PRM's refugee resettlement program also has included refugees identified by UNHCR and Refugees International as stateless or potentially stateless, such as children of Burmese refugees in Thailand.

Background on Statelessness

Who Is Stateless? According to the UNHCR, a stateless person is someone who, under national laws, does not enjoy citizenship – the legal bond between a government and an individual – with any country. While no exact figure is available, UNHCR estimates that over 15 million people worldwide are not recognized as nationals by any state and are therefore legally or *de facto* stateless.

Stateless populations exist in every region of the world. They include the Roma in Europe, Rohingyas in Burma, Biharis in Bangladesh, some Palestinians, Bidoon in Kuwait and other countries, denationalized Kurds in Syria, and persons of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic.

Causes of Statelessness

- Failure of hospitals and other places of birth to properly register newborns.
- Political change and transfer of territory which may alter the nationality status of citizens of the former state(s).
- Targeted discrimination against minorities.
- Administrative oversights, procedural problems, or conflicts of law.
- Laws restricting citizenship, e.g. refugee.
- Lack of financial ability to cover the cost of registration and birth certificates.
- Customs and traditional attitudes about birth registration.
- Destruction of official records.
- Laws restricting the rights of mothers to pass on their nationality to their children.
- Laws relating to children born out of wedlock and during transit.
- Alteration of nationality during marriage or the dissolution of marriage between couples from different countries.
- Voluntarily renouncing one's nationality without first acquiring another.

Related Links for More Information

- PRM's website: <http://www.state.gov/g/prm>
- UNHCR's website devoted to statelessness: <http://www.unhcr.org/statelessness>
- UNHCR's Q and A report on statelessness: <http://www.unhcr.org/basics/BASICS/452611862.pdf>
- Refugees International's website on statelessness: <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/issue/detail/4835>

