

Invisible millions pay price of statelessness

People rejected by countries they call home live in a shadowy limbo



Rohingya fishermen pull a boat near a refugee camp in Teknaf on Friday. In 1982 Myanmar passed a law that made it impossible for Rohingyas to get full citizenship.

LONDON — Rejected by the countries they call home and denied the most basic of rights, stateless people live in a shadowy limbo — in the words of one such person, like being "between the earth and the sky."

Up to 15 million people are stateless, not recognized as nationals by any country. They are some of the most invisible people on the planet — an anonymity the United Nations hopes to lift when it launches an international campaign on Thursday to highlight their plight.

"One of the big problems we have is that this simply is not recognized as being a major issue globally," said Mark Manly, head of the stateless unit at the U.N. refugee agency UNHCR.

"In the media there's very little discussion, in universities there's very little research and in the U.N., until relatively recently, there hasn't been a lot of discussion either, so the effect of all that is that we still have major gaps in our knowledge," Manly told AlertNet, a humanitarian news service run by the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Statelessness exacerbates poverty, creates social tensions, breaks up families and destroys children's futures. In some cases it can even fuel wars when disenfranchised people pick up weapons, as has happened in Ivory Coast and Democratic Republic of Congo.

Yet only 38 countries have signed the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, which marks its 50th anniversary on Aug. 30.

One of the largest stateless groups is the Rohingyas, a Muslim people of South Asian descent refused citizenship by the Myanmar government. Hundreds of thousands are scattered throughout Bangladesh and Southeast Asia.

"There are no countries in this world for Rohingyas," said Kyaw Myint, 44, now living in Malaysia.

"Even animals can have peace of mind, but for the Rohingyas, because we are stateless, there is no peace of mind."

The effects vary by country, but typically stateless people are barred from education, healthcare and formal employment. They often can't start a business, own property, hold a driving license or open a bank account. They can't get married legally or travel abroad to work or visit family.

And they can't vote, which means they can't elect politicians who might be able to improve their lot.

Being stateless is like being "between the earth and the sky", said Mohamed Alenezi, a Bedouin from Kuwait.

"You are here and not here," added Alenezi, 42, who now lives in London.

Like many Bedouins (stateless Arabs) he is the descendant of nomadic Bedouin tribes, which for centuries roamed freely across what is now Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan and Iraq.

Origins of statelessness

Probing the origins of statelessness is a lesson in world history and geography.

In many cases groups failed to be included when their countries became independent or drew up a new constitution. Many Kuwaiti Bedouins fell through the cracks when the country became independent in 1961, and the Roma in Europe have

faced major problems in obtaining citizenship in the new countries that emerged after the break-up of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia.



Stephane Mahe /Reuters

A teenage girl fixes her hair at an illegal Roma camp in July 2010 near Nantes, western France. An estimated 70,000 to 80,000 Roma have no nationality, they often do not register the birth of a child and do not hold official property titles, preferring to pass their houses to relatives informally.

Manly said the UNHCR is closely watching the succession of South Sudan. It is also scrutinizing the drafting of Nepal's new constitution amid fears millions could end up stateless.

A major factor behind statelessness is often racial or ethnic discrimination. Syria, for example, denationalized many Kurds in 1962 and Mauritania expelled around 75,000 Black Mauritians in 1989.

Stateless people are vulnerable to exploitation, including slavery and prostitution, and risk arbitrary detention. Their lack of identity can make accessing legal help impossible — no one knows how many stateless people are locked up worldwide.

Among the biggest sufferers are children. Open Society Foundations, the [George Soros](#) initiative which among other things tries to improve the lives of marginalized people, estimates around 5 million children globally are stateless, often simply because their parents are.

The 1961 convention stipulates signatories must grant nationality to a person born in their territory who would otherwise be stateless. Experts say this is key to resolving the problem.

"This is really a crucial principle that needs to be realized if you want to break the cycle of statelessness," said Sebastian Kohn, Open Society's expert on statelessness.

"It doesn't mean giving nationality to everyone born on your territory. It's just about giving nationality to stateless persons born on your territory."

Kohn also urged governments to abolish citizenship laws, which discriminate against women -- another big cause of statelessness. In at least 30 countries, mothers cannot pass nationality to their children. If the father is stateless, foreign or absent, the child usually ends up stateless.

Some hope

There have been some successes. For example, Sri Lanka has amended laws to allow Hill Tamils, descendants of immigrants from India, to obtain nationality. Ukraine has reintegrated Crimean Tartars deported to Central Asia under Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin.

And experts believe awareness is growing.

"I think states are actually starting to recognize that there is a potential overlap between statelessness and national security issues," Kohn said.

"Obviously, if you disenfranchise people that can lead to all sorts of social and potentially security issues, and in the worst cases civil war."

In December the UNHCR will host a ministerial-level meeting where countries will be asked to join the 1961 convention and make pledges to address specific concerns on their territory.

"It's an issue whose time has come," said Maureen Lynch, a consultant to the International Observatory on Statelessness.

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