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UNHCR announces push to end statelessness worldwide by end-2024

UNHCR is today launching a global “I Belong” campaign aimed at ending within 10 years the problem of statelessness – a devastating legal limbo for the millions of people worldwide who lack any nationality and the human rights protections that go with it. The goal of eradicating statelessness is looking increasingly possible thanks to dramatic recent progress in the number of States acceding to two key UN human rights treaties.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres, UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie and more than 20 celebrities and world opinion-leaders today published an Open Letter, saying that 60 years after the United Nations first agreed to protect stateless people, “now it’s time to end statelessness itself.”

At least ten million people worldwide are currently stateless and a baby is born stateless every ten minutes. Not allowed a nationality, they are often denied the rights and services that countries normally offer their citizens.

“Statelessness can mean a life without education, without medical care or legal employment… a life without the ability to move freely, without prospects or hope,” the Open Letter said. “Statelessness is inhuman. We believe it is time to end this injustice.”

UNHCR’s Special Envoy Angelina Jolie was among the first to sign the Open Letter. “Being stateless means you and your children having no legal identity, no passport, no vote, and few or no opportunities to get an education. Ending statelessness would right these terrible wrongs. But it would also strengthen society in countries where stateless people are found, by making it possible to draw on their energy and talents. It is both an obligation and an opportunity for governments everywhere to put an end to this exclusion.”

Most situations of statelessness are a direct consequence of discrimination based on ethnicity, religion or gender. Moreover, 27 countries at present deny women the right to pass their nationality onto their children on an equal basis as men, a situation that can create chains of statelessness that span generations. There is also a very real link between statelessness, displacement and regional stability.

UNHCR’s campaign is being launched amid signs of a shift in international attitudes surrounding statelessness. Just three years ago, there were barely 100 States parties to the two statelessness treaties - the 1954 UN Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. Today the number of accessions stands at 144, bringing critical mass within reach.

Nonetheless, despite such progress, new risks of statelessness have emerged with the growing number of major conflicts. The wars in Central African Republic and Syria for example have forced millions of people into internal displacement or into becoming refugees.
Tens of thousands of refugee children have been born in exile and UNHCR is working closely with the governments and partners in the countries receiving refugees on prioritizing birth registration for these children. This, and the fact that many lack documents or the fact that in some situations fathers have gone missing because of the conflict means that many of these children may face difficulties in proving that they are citizens.

UNHCR has partnered with the United Colors of Benetton to create the ‘I Belong’ campaign, which aims to draw global attention to the devastating life-long consequences of statelessness. Benetton, in its spirit of supporting social campaigns has developed the creative content of the campaign and the campaign website to host it. Following the campaign launch, the Open Letter will become an online petition on this new microsite, aiming to collect ten million signatures in support of ending statelessness within ten years.

UNHCR also released today a Special Report on Statelessness which highlights the human impact of the phenomenon, and a ten-point Global Action Plan to End Statelessness which aims both to resolve major existing crises and to ensure no child is born stateless in the future.

“Statelessness makes people feel like their very existence is a crime,” said Guterres. “We have a historic opportunity to end the scourge of statelessness within 10 years, and give back hope to millions of people. We cannot afford to fail this challenge.”

While issues of statelessness remain politically contentious in some countries, in others ending it can be as simple as changing a few words in a country’s citizenship law. Over the past decade, legislative and policy changes have allowed more than four million stateless people to acquire a nationality or have their nationality confirmed.

2014 marks the 60th anniversary of the 1954 UN Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, which, alongside the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, provides the international legal basis for ending statelessness. With enough political will, UNHCR believes statelessness can be resolved. And unlike so many other problems facing governments today, statelessness can be solved in our lifetime.

UNHCR calls on all States that have not yet signed these Conventions to do so - that includes Cyprus - and join a growing number of States committed to resolving statelessness and help make a positive difference in the lives of stateless people.

Supporting multimedia materials including video stories and a report are available at http://unhcr.org/stateless2014/