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High Commissioner's Programme**

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Update on statelessness

Summary

This paper provides an update on the efforts made by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), States and other actors to address statelessness since the presentation of document EC/74/SC/CRP.12 to the Standing Committee at its eighty-seventh meeting in June 2023. It reports on the progress achieved worldwide towards ending statelessness since the launch of the #IBelong campaign and outlines a vision for renewed multi-stakeholder action on statelessness.

I. Introduction

1. In November 2014, UNHCR launched the ten-year #IBelong campaign to end statelessness. The campaign conceived a world free of statelessness and has served as a catalyst for commitment and action in this area. Over the course of the last nine years, the #IBelong campaign and its accompanying Global Action Plan to End Statelessness 2014-2024 have enabled significant progress in all regions. The campaign has also strengthened UNHCR leadership and work on statelessness.
2. Notwithstanding significant progress, statelessness remains a persistent global challenge. Despite a considerable number of pledges related to statelessness made by States, civil society and regional and international organizations, implementation has not fully matched the expressed political will. By the end of 2022, UNHCR reported that 4.4 million people were stateless or of undetermined nationality. However, it is widely recognized that the real number is much higher given the complexities in data collection and the relative invisibility of stateless persons in national statistical exercises.
3. In 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees identified statelessness as one of the UNHCR eight strategic focus areas and called for a redoubling of efforts to end statelessness. With this goal in mind, UNHCR developed a Strategic Plan 2023-2026 which builds on the momentum created by the #IBelong campaign. It aims to enhance efforts across the organization to address statelessness and, together with partners, to bring about transformative and measurable change. The Office is working to generate renewed commitment and action from States through targeted advocacy, including by leveraging the influence of United Nations country teams, while expanding multi-stakeholder engagement and further involving stateless communities. It will focus on solutions, including the granting of nationality to stateless persons, and combat discrimination.
4. Efforts to raise awareness and support policy advocacy on statelessness have also been a key component throughout the #IBelong campaign. UNHCR has sought to draw media attention to the positive measures taken by States, and to amplify the voices of stateless persons and communities through human interest stories.

II. Progress made by States

5. Ending statelessness is ultimately about States making and implementing commitments to reform laws and policies to prevent and respond to statelessness. This requires long-term engagement through advocacy, technical assistance, and awareness-raising among decision-makers and other stakeholders who can influence change. Notable progress has been made in the three areas outlined below.

Accessions to the United Nations conventions on statelessness

6. Since the launch of the #IBelong campaign, 14 States have acceded to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, bringing the number of States parties to this convention to 98. This represents 51 per cent of United Nations Member States. In addition, 17 States have acceded to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, resulting in a total of 80 States parties to this Convention, or 41 per cent of Member States.

7. In the years preceding the launch of the #IBelong campaign, UNHCR had already stepped up its advocacy efforts and called for accession to the statelessness conventions, including at the ministerial intergovernmental event on refugees and stateless persons which it organized in 2011. These dedicated advocacy efforts over the past 14 years have resulted in a total of 77 new accessions to the statelessness conventions, which represent a 76 per cent increase in the number of States parties to the conventions.

Stronger legal and policy framework to end statelessness

8. The #IBelong campaign has generated action in several countries that brought their national legislation on the right to nationality and the protection of stateless persons in line with international standards. These efforts have resulted in stronger legal frameworks to help end statelessness in all regions. In many cases, positive actions and measures taken by States

have stemmed from the implementation of pledges made at the high-level segment on statelessness that took place during the seventieth plenary session of the UNHCR Executive Committee, and the first Global Refugee Forum, which were both held in 2019.¹ These legislative and policy reforms have led to enhanced protection for stateless persons in at least 25 countries and territories,² including through the establishment of statelessness determination procedures and the improved identification of stateless persons, and 13 countries have adopted provisions to ensure that children are not born stateless.³ Since the beginning of the #IBelong campaign, Liberia, Madagascar and Sierra Leone have granted women the right to confer their nationality onto their children on an equal basis as men, preventing the risk of children being born stateless. Only 12 per cent of Member States, corresponding to 24 States, continue to have such gender-discriminatory provisions in their nationality laws.

9. Moreover, strengthened regional legal frameworks to address statelessness have been developed in the last nine years. A key example is the recent adoption of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights Relating to the Specific Aspects of the Right to a Nationality and the Eradication of Statelessness in Africa by the African Union Assembly of Heads of State and Government in February 2024.

Resolving cases of statelessness

10. Resolving cases of statelessness has been a key objective of the #IBelong campaign. Since 2014, several States have taken measures to confirm or grant nationality to more than 500,000 individuals, ensuring a permanent solution for them. The benefits of the acquisition or confirmation of nationality have also been amplified for their extended families.

11. Key developments in this area have taken place in Kyrgyzstan, which has resolved all known cases of statelessness on its territory, becoming the first country to achieve this milestone. Kenya has granted nationality to stateless minority groups, namely the Makonde, the Pemba and the Shona, and is working towards advancing solutions for other stateless groups and individuals. Viet Nam has addressed statelessness among former Cambodian refugees, and Turkmenistan is on track to resolving all known cases of protracted statelessness among thousands of citizens of undetermined nationality from the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Iraq also took major steps towards resolving statelessness on its territory, including by restoring the citizenship of individuals belonging to groups that had been deprived of their nationality by the prior regime. In addition, consular outreach has played an important role in re-confirming the nationality of individuals who were born abroad to undocumented parents and who faced specific risks of statelessness. Such cross-border consular services have been offered by the Malawian authorities in Zimbabwe and by the authorities of Côte d'Ivoire in Ghana. Twenty-one countries have also established statelessness determination procedures, which help identify stateless persons in migratory contexts.

III. Improving data on statelessness

12. Reliable and comprehensive data on statelessness is essential for resolving statelessness. An encouraging development is the increase in the number of countries for which figures relating to statelessness are being reported – from 77 countries in 2014 to 95 countries in 2022. At the end of 2022, the total number of reported stateless persons and

¹ During the high-level segment on statelessness at the seventieth plenary session of the UNHCR Executive Committee and the first Global Refugee Forum in 2019, 280 pledges relating to statelessness were submitted by States. Of these pledges, 48 per cent have been fully implemented or are in progress. At the Global Refugee Forum in 2023, an additional 135 pledges on statelessness were submitted by 42 States and other stakeholders.

² These countries and territories are: Argentina, Armenia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Ecuador, Georgia, Greece, Iceland, Kazakhstan, Montenegro, the Netherlands (Kingdom of), Panama, Paraguay, the Republic of Moldova, Slovakia, Türkiye, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, the United States of America and Uruguay, as well as Kosovo (S/RES/1244 (1999)).

³ These countries are: Albania, Armenia, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Estonia, Iceland, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Philippines, the Republic of Moldova and Tajikistan.

persons of undetermined nationality was 4.4 million. However, it is well established that the actual number of stateless persons is much higher. Approximately half of all countries, including many with known stateless populations, lack data on stateless persons. In addition, several countries only have data for a portion of the known stateless populations on their territories, and data on stateless populations is not always comparable due to inconsistent criteria for counting those who are stateless or of undetermined nationality.

13. To respond to these challenges, UNHCR supported the development and endorsement of the International Recommendations on Statelessness Statistics by the United Nations Statistical Commission in March 2023. The recommendations were created by an expert group, to which UNHCR belongs. The initiative presents new opportunities to strengthen the production of statelessness statistics at the national level and to promote greater harmonization of data at the regional and global levels. For greater impact, the recommendations need to be used when developing national surveys and censuses for administrative data systems. UNHCR is working with partners to support the dissemination of, and trainings on, these critical recommendations in order to improve statelessness statistics at all levels.

IV. Expanded partnerships

14. At the global, regional and national levels, the #IBelong campaign has facilitated multi-stakeholder engagement on statelessness, helping generate awareness and action. This has also demonstrated how strengthening engagement with a wide range of stakeholders is both beneficial and urgent.

15. Engagement with regional organizations has been key in reinforcing regional legal and policy frameworks over the last nine years. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights Relating to the Specific Aspects of the Right to a Nationality and the Eradication of Statelessness in Africa was a milestone in this regard. Engagement with the Economic Community of West African States, the Southern African Development Community, the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the League of Arab States, as well as with processes such as the Brazil Declaration and the Bali process, have generated momentum at the regional level and enabled the adoption of regional frameworks, model laws and action plans to better prevent and respond to statelessness.

16. Regional civil society networks established in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, Central Asia, the Americas and East Africa have made significant contributions to advancing the statelessness agenda. Work on statelessness has also been strengthened through the emergence of organizations led by those affected by statelessness, operating at community or national level, amplifying their voices and enhancing advocacy for affected communities. Supporting and engaging stateless-led organizations as key actors of progress has been critical. UNHCR will continue to enhance its partnerships with these organizations and support their leadership.

17. The Friends of the #IBelong campaign, which was established in 2015, brings together more than 30 Geneva-based Permanent Missions. This group, chaired by the United States of America, has played an important role in spearheading and coordinating diplomatic efforts to eradicate statelessness. The Group has issued joint statements on statelessness and the right to nationality in international convenings, and contributed to resolutions in human rights mechanisms.

18. Progress in thematic areas has been made by the Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights, which played an important role in addressing gender discrimination in nationality laws. The Coalition on Every Child's Right to a Nationality, which was established in 2017 and which is co-led by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and UNHCR, has also strengthened awareness-raising and efforts to combat childhood statelessness, and promote the right of every child to acquire a nationality.

19. The United Nations Secretary-General's Guidance Note on Statelessness issued in 2018 has outlined guiding principles and a policy framework for action in the United Nations

system. It emphasized that all United Nations entities should tackle both the causes and consequences of statelessness as a key priority within broader efforts to strengthen the rule of law and promote human rights. In addition to the efforts undertaken by individual agencies to support the statelessness agenda, this guidance has also been implemented through operational frameworks, including in the United Nations Development Programme and UNICEF. Gender equality in nationality laws and the discrimination of minorities have also been key thematic areas of focus within the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

20. In 2022, UNHCR initiated work to establish a Global Alliance to End Statelessness, a new multi-stakeholder platform that brings together Member States, regional organizations, United Nations entities, stateless-led organizations and other civil society actors. The Alliance is designed not only to advance action and solutions at the country level but also to accelerate change on thematic issues such as gender discrimination and childhood statelessness. During the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023, 24 entities, including 11 States⁴ and 13 organizations,⁵ committed to joining the Alliance, which will be launched at the high-level segment on statelessness during the seventy-fifth plenary session of the UNHCR Executive Committee. More commitments to join the Alliance are anticipated.

V. Setting a vision for renewed multi-stakeholder action on statelessness

21. Looking forward, further efforts are needed to make statelessness a problem of the past. Building on the lessons learned from the #IBelong campaign, the following areas of action are essential to prevent and reduce statelessness:

- *Stronger focus on solutions.* Ending statelessness requires concrete action to be taken by States to grant nationality to stateless persons and confirm the nationality of those with undetermined nationality. Success is defined by the resolution of protracted situations of statelessness and the prevention of new instances of statelessness. Countries that have opted for group-based approaches, rather than a case-by-case response, tend to be more successful and rapid in scaling up solutions.
- *Seize the opportunity of the sustainable development goals and the commitment to achieve legal identity for all to better leverage partnerships with development actors.* At the country level, statelessness should be included in national development plans and the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks. The Global Alliance to End Statelessness will offer renewed opportunities to leverage the capacity and influence of Resident Coordinators and United Nations country teams. The prevention of statelessness also needs to be central in efforts to mitigate the impact of climate change, since climate-related displacement increases risks of statelessness.
- *Recognition of the central and transformative role of stateless communities and stateless-led organizations as actors of change.* Community engagement and empowerment need to be at the heart of responses to ensure that the voices of those affected are amplified. UNHCR will work with a range of stakeholders to support the lead role of stateless persons and stateless-led organizations.
- *Adopt a “whole-of-society” approach to end statelessness.* A critical lesson learned from the #IBelong campaign is that progress to end statelessness requires ensuring that statelessness is not seen as the sole responsibility of UNHCR. The establishment of the Global Alliance to End Statelessness is a move towards coalition-building and

⁴ These countries are: Australia, Côte d’Ivoire, Ecuador, Montenegro, the Philippines, the Republic of Moldova, Slovenia, Spain, Thailand, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America.

⁵ These entities include: the Inter-Parliamentary Union, OHCHR, UNICEF, United Stateless, the Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness and the Women’s Refugee Commission.

multi-stakeholder engagement, ensuring more coordinated and effective action to address statelessness at the country, regional and global levels.

22. The high-level segment on statelessness, which will be held in October 2024 as part of the seventy-fifth plenary session of UNHCR Executive Committee, will be a key multilateral moment to draw attention to this issue and help mobilize further support to end statelessness. This event will be an opportunity to celebrate progress as well as to generate momentum for renewed action to translate the vision of a world free of statelessness into reality.
