

4 YEARS GONE, 6 TO GO – ERADICATING STATELESSNESS IN WEST AFRICA BY 2024 IS NO DISTANT DREAM

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Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire - West Africa is today celebrating the fourth anniversary of the Abidjan Declaration on the eradication of statelessness, adopted by all the Member States of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Four years after their pledge to eradicate statelessness in West Africa by 2024, thousands have benefited from the commitment to ensure that everyone in the region has access to a nationality.

A stateless person is someone who does not have a nationality of any country. Statelessness affects millions of people worldwide, with devastating consequence that deprive them of basic human rights and access to basic services, leaving them marginalized, discriminated against and particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

“Ending statelessness in West Africa is an ambitious but achievable goal. This past year, states in the region have made commendable achievements towards it,” says Liz Ahua, UNHCR Regional Representative for West Africa. “Thanks to their efforts to enhance civil registration and campaigns to raise awareness on the importance of birth registration, millions who were either stateless or at risk of statelessness were able to confirm a nationality and identity documentation.”

“Civil and birth registration are key to prevent statelessness, and are a major tool to ensure protection and solutions, as set out in the Global Compact on Refugees,” she adds.

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, works closely with ECOWAS institutions and Member States to implement the measures laid out in the Abidjan Declaration.

In 2018, 37,250 persons who were at risk of statelessness received birth certificates in Burkina Faso.

In Guinea-Bissau, 7,000 former refugees, many of whom fled their countries of origin without identification papers, will become citizens. In Mali, the nationality of 1,161 refugees born in the country was confirmed by the authorities.

In Côte d'Ivoire, three historic court decisions granted nationality to eleven children found abandoned in the territory (foundlings). Furthermore, a new Law on Civil Status that establishes a special procedure for late birth registration, re-establishment of identity documents and transcription of acts of birth will help hundreds of thousands of people to have access to civil registration and Ivorian nationality.

In Niger, several million people also benefitted from late birth registration and had their marriages registered as a result of special procedures free of charge.

“For these millions of individuals, documentation or proof of nationality is essential to access the same basic human rights that most of us take for granted: they now have a legal identity, they can access education, health care and job opportunities”, says Antonio Canhandula, UNHCR Representative to Nigeria and to ECOWAS.

Benin, Burkina Faso, the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau and Mali have officially adopted national action plans to eradicate statelessness. Seven countries in the region have begun legislative reforms relating to nationality, and fourteen of the fifteen ECOWAS Member States have appointed a Government Statelessness Focal Point to specifically lead on these issues.

In May 2017, West Africa became the first region in the world to develop a binding regional action plan (Banjul Plan of Action), through which ECOWAS Member States committed to eradicating statelessness. In this context, Member States have also engaged in supporting the Africa Union Draft Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Specific Aspects of the Right to a Nationality and the Eradication of Statelessness in Africa, adopted in 2018.

With six years left to eradicate statelessness, States in the region must however not become complacent. Progress is still needed to identify stateless persons and to amend existing legislation to ensure their protection. The revision of nationality laws and administrative procedures, in line with the Abidjan Declaration, will reduce and prevent statelessness going forward.

“During the High-Level Event on Statelessness in October this year, West Africa can rightly show laudable leadership and solidarity, not only in providing solutions to refugees, but also in delivering on their commitment to end statelessness” says Liz Ahua.

About the #IBelong Campaign

On 4 November 2014, UNHCR launched its #IBelong Campaign to End Statelessness. Statelessness is a man-made problem and relatively easy to resolve and prevent. With the necessary political will and public support, millions of people around the world could acquire a nationality and prevent their children from being born stateless. The #IBelong Campaign is supported by a Global Action Plan, which sets out concrete steps for States to help resolve the problem. By acquiring a nationality, millions of stateless people around the world could gain full access to their human rights and enjoy a sense of belonging in their communities.

Countdown to the 2019 High-Level Event on Statelessness

In October this year, States and other actors will be invited to Geneva to participate in a High-Level Event on Statelessness, which will mark the mid-point of the #IBelong Campaign. At the

event, they will have the opportunity to highlight their accomplishments in the first five years of the Campaign. States will also have the chance to deliver concrete pledges for actions that they are unable to complete by 2019, but which they commit to undertaking by the end of the Campaign in 2024.

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