

STATELESSNESS IN WEST AFRICA

NEWSLETTER #7

August – December 2015

1ST ANNIVERSARY OF THE #IBELONG CAMPAIGN

Diverse and colourful events marked the first anniversary of the [#IBelong](#) Campaign in the region.

- In **Dakar**, [youth on roller skates](#) rallied on the streets to spread the message, “Engaged, everyone has the right to a nationality”, in French and in Wolof, the local language. [Senegalese graffiti artists](#) illustrated the plight of stateless people on the main wall of the UNHCR Office, attracting the attention of spectators. During the month of November, the two national media channels aired video clips on statelessness and the same messages was broadcast on LED screens throughout the capital and at the airport.



Dakar, Senegal © AfridiMedia



Dakar, Senegal © Haap/UNHCR



Dakar, Senegal © AfridiMedia



Dakar, Senegal © Haap/UNHCR

- In **Monrovia**, the Government and the UNHCR jointly commemorated the anniversary with a press conference and a live radio discussion featuring a Liberian mother of three stateless children, who provided compelling testimony of their everyday struggles. Yet again, the Government of Liberia renewed its commitment to end statelessness and called upon the UNHCR to help ensure that all children born in and outside the country and who are entitled to Liberian nationality have access to acquisition procedures.



Monrovia, Liberia © UNHCR

- In **Abidjan**, a team consisting of the UNHCR, the Government, and the NGO ‘Search For Common Ground’ used mobile cinema to sensitise people in Adjamé, a popular neighbourhood in Abidjan, on the importance of birth registration and the consequences of statelessness. After the screening, people engaged in question and answer sessions with the organizers and sought advice from the government on nationality issues.



Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire © UNHCR

Join us in our Campaign to End Statelessness :
<http://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/>

ABIDJAN COMMITMENTS TRANSLATE INTO ACTION

Consultative Conference on Citizenship in West Africa

The Consultative Conference on Citizenship and Statelessness in West Africa took place in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire from 28-30 September. It was the first official gathering since the Ministerial Conference in February 2015, which led to the adoption of the groundbreaking [Abidjan Declaration on the Eradication of Statelessness](#). Participants, including government representatives, civil society, academia and the media, presented progress reports in relation to their commitments made earlier this year. Participants also took the opportunity to share and elaborate on good practices. [See the final outcome document](#). Closer collaboration between governments and civil society was recommended as a key step in this regard.

Appointment of government focal points on statelessness – art. 22

Countries in the region are making good progress regarding the implementation of their commitments made in Abidjan. So far, eleven ECOWAS Member States have officially nominated national statelessness coordinators.¹

Action plan to end statelessness – art. 24

In addition to **Benin, The Gambia, Liberia** and **Mali**, five more countries are currently elaborating their national action plans through a consultative process involving different Ministries, NGOs, media outlets and UN agencies. Benin and The Gambia have already adopted their national action plans at ministerial level. By January 2016, **Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea-Conakry, and Senegal** are expected to be among those countries that have a national strategy set up to eradicate statelessness by 2024.

Revision of nationality laws – art. 2, 3

- **Guinea** announced that it is revising its nationality law, and a draft law should be submitted to the parliament soon.
- Similarly, in **Togo**, the nationality law is being revised.
- In **Côte d’Ivoire** some members of parliament are actively lobbying for nationality law reforms.
- In **Senegal**, a key Member of Parliament committed to disseminate the Abidjan Declaration and both Statelessness Conventions to all 150 members of parliament members of parliament in the country and to sensitize them on the causes and consequences of statelessness.
- In **Liberia**, the Commissioner of the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization (BIN), under the Interior Ministry, has started the process of reviewing the 1973 Alien and Naturalization Law of Liberia, including Part III that provides rules of attribution and loss of Liberian nationality. The process will include a consultation of a large number of stakeholders including the UNHCR.
- In **Nigeria**, the UNHCR met in October with the Speaker of the National Assembly and advocated for the implementation of the statelessness conventions.

Improving birth registration – art. 6

- In **Benin**, 510 persons residing in the disputed border area received birth certificates through late registration procedures in November – a big step towards acquiring nationality. Another 500 applicants are currently being processed.
- In **Cote d’Ivoire**, with the support of the UNHCR, authorities organized a judicial court hearing to issue late birth certificates in cities located in Western, Northeastern, and northern Cote d’Ivoire (Biankouma, Bouna Ferkessédougou and Korhogo). Totally; over 3,000 people, mostly adults, received birth certificates, an important step to prevent statelessness.
- In **Niger**, amongst the several thousand people displaced in Diffa, a large number have relevant links with Niger but lack birth registration and other proof of identification in order to be documented as Nigerien nationals. In October, the UNHCR organized a roundtable to identify concrete solutions for displaced populations in the Diffa region, in Northern Niger, in order to obtain identification documents. The round table gathered representatives from the government and civil society. The meeting concluded with the need to strengthen the capacity of the local administration and the Ministry of Justice in order to issue the concerned individuals with a late birth certificate.

¹ Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, and Sierra Leone.

Accessions to the Statelessness Conventions – art. 4, 14

As of today, 10 ECOWAS Member States have acceded to the 1954 Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons and 9 have acceded to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.



Mali Parliament © UNHCR

In **Mali**, Members of Parliament decided, in an historic unanimous vote, to accede to both Statelessness Conventions on 16 December, the next step being the deposit of the instruments of accession.

- After the promulgation of the law on accession to the convention in August 2016, **Guinea-Bissau** is also on the verge of depositing the instruments for accession to the Conventions.
- The Ministers Council in **Sierra Leone** approved accession in August 2015, the next step being the adoption by Parliament. In September, the National Commission for Human Rights, key government representatives and the UNHCR met with the Parliament and advocated for the accession to the conventions.
- At the beginning of December the Interior Deputy Minister of the government in **Ghana** confirmed that a joint draft memorandum on accession is being presented to Cabinet for approval.
- In **Burkina Faso**, the Ministry of Justice, Human Rights and civil promotion conveyed a consultative meeting with about 50 stakeholders active in the area of nationality. The participants recommended the accession to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

Reducing statelessness – art. 18

In **Côte d'Ivoire**, UNHCR is supporting efforts by the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights to implement a government program which will enable individuals, including stateless persons, who meet certain criteria, to apply for Ivorian nationality through a simple declaration. The program has run since early 2014, the application period is open until 24 January 2016. To date over 120,000 people submitted an application and over 4000 applicants.

SENSITIZATION ON STATELESSNESS

- In **Burkina Faso**, in the Sahel region at the border with Niger, in an area formerly subject to dispute, UNHCR met with authorities and village elders to sensitize local actors on issues of statelessness and groups possibly at risk of statelessness. The concerned authorities identified the weak birth registration system as a potential cause for statelessness and populations living in disputed border areas as well as nomadic populations in the Sahel as being at heightened risk of statelessness.

- In **Niger**, large-scale national sensitization efforts on statelessness were conducted over the past months. A documentary on the eradication of statelessness, produced in Niger, was translated into all 9 local languages and broadcast by the main national TV channels to raise awareness on the risks of statelessness, particularly through the lack of birth registration. Attention and awareness on the issue was further raised through training and information workshops, the mobilization of local authorities and through innovative initiatives, for example an interactive theatre project.
- In **the Gambia**, the EU organized a workshop in November gathering government representative and international agencies, with the objective to improve key areas of Gambian law to meet international standards and best practices – among them nationality legislation. During the workshop a Gambian academic expert highlighted the lack of an efficient birth and civil registration system and lack of nationality documentation, especially in rural areas, as main obstacles in eradicating statelessness in the Gambia.

UNIVERSITIES ENGAGE TO FIGHT STELESSNESS



Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso © UNHCR

In **Burkina Faso**, on 24 October 2015, the Higher Institute of International Law and Human Rights in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso organised a one day conference on the “statelessness and nationality crisis” at the University of Ouaga II. The objective was to sensitise universities students, researchers and media outlets on the issue of statelessness and the efforts made at the national and regional level to eradicate statelessness. The event was attended by over 300 students.

In **Togo**, the Public Law Centre of the Lomé University organized a conference on “Making it right - the normative impact of the law on statelessness”. The workshop brought together law professors and teachers from different French-speaking universities throughout the region. The experts discussed a wide range of subject, the definition a stateless person, causes of statelessness including gaps in nationality law, armed conflict, and climate changes, ECOWAS citizenship, and measures to prevent statelessness. The aim of the conference was to nurture ideas and stimulate legal analysis amongst researchers, professors and students.



Lomé, Togo © Lomé University



Grand-Popo, Benin © Haap/UNHCR

First regional training for francophone Africa

The first regional training on statelessness and the right to nationality for French-speaking countries from South, East, Central, and West Africa was successfully conducted in Benin from 23-27 November. The event, jointly organized by the UNHCR and the UNESCO Chair/Cotonou University, was an opportunity for the participants representing governments and civil society to share information and best practices from their respective countries as well as to get inspiration by the experience of fighting statelessness in West Africa. The #IBelong Campaign gained a number of fellow campaigners and supporters.

PARLIAMENTARIANS UNITE TO END STATELESSNESS

Members of Parliament from 39 countries (among them 10 from West Africa) attended the “Conference on Ensuring everyone’s Right to a Nationality: The Role of Parliaments in Ending and Preventing Statelessness” co-organized by the South African Parliament, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the UNHCR from 26-27 November in Cape Town. The almost 100 members of parliament attending the conference welcomed the new regional initiatives to address statelessness presented during the conference, like the Abidjan Declaration and the envisaged protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Right to a Nationality in Africa. An outcome document featuring a 7-point Plan of Action was adopted. Concrete action include reviewing national legislation to ensure compliance with international standards to prevent and reduce statelessness, undertaking legislative reform to remove discrimination from nationality laws, and formation of a group of parliamentary champions of the UNHCR’s #IBelong Campaign.

STATELESSNESS IN THE AU HUMANITARIAN POLICY

On 20 November, West African States, with the support of the UNHCR, successfully advocated for the inclusion of statelessness issues in the African Union (AU) Humanitarian Policy Framework to be submitted to the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. As a result, statelessness is now reflected in the African Union common position as a major humanitarian concern that can be both a cause and consequence of forced displacement. The common position and Humanitarian Policy Framework both call for the protection and assistance to stateless people on the basis of the 1954 Convention.

STATELESS CHILDREN – THEIR TESTIMONIES

In 2015, the theme of the global campaign against statelessness is ‘Children and Statelessness’. The UNHCR went to meet children who were stateless or at risk of statelessness in Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire and Liberia.

- In **Senegal**, street children are exposed to an increased risk of statelessness if they have not been registered at birth and have no evidence to establish their identity (filiation and place of birth), as in the case of Alioune. Aged 21, he lives in a reception center at the outskirts of Dakar; he has never had any identification documents. He was not registered at birth, and his parents, who themselves hold no documents and are now divorced, have never helped

Alioune with his attempt to regularize his situation with the registration office. For ten years he trained as a carpenter, but given that he did not possess any documents, he could not receive his diploma. Today he works in a restaurant, but cannot get his salary, as he is unable to open a bank account without documents.



Dieynaba © Médoune Fall

Dieynaba has a mental disability. She was abandoned in a suburb of Dakar and is currently being supported by a state-run home in Dakar. Young Dieynaba has no legal identity as neither her parentage nor place of birth is known. She cannot claim the Senegalese nationality, since the Senegalese law grants nationality only to a newborn baby who was found. She cannot claim any other nationality. She is stateless.

- In **Côte d'Ivoire**, children who are abandoned as well as those who were not registered at birth and are unable to rebuild their legal identity, are exposed to an increased risk of statelessness. Annick, aged 13, was left in the care of her now deceased grandparents. Her birth was never registered, and there is no official proof of her parentage. Her foster family has tried to trace anyone who could testify her parentage. Due to a lack of evidence of her legal identity, Annick is unable to claim Ivorian nationality: she is stateless.
- In **Liberia**, the law does not allow a mother to pass on her nationality to her children in all circumstances.



Liberia © Diaz/UNHCR

Georgia is a mother of three: Emelda (17), Solomon (14), and Stella (12). Georgia is Liberian; the children's father, now deceased, was Nigerian. The children were born in Nigeria, but were not registered at birth. Georgia went back to live in Liberia with her children. The Liberian law does not allow her to pass her nationality on to her children. The children have no proof to claim Nigerian nationality: they are stateless.

[See more on this family's story](#)

UNHCR released a new report on the situation of stateless children in West Africa and worldwide:

["I am here, I belong"](#)

STATELESSNESS FILMS RELEASED IN 2015

- **[Right to a Future](#)** : An animation film to sensitize a large audience on causes and consequences of statelessness
- **[Paper Dream](#)** : Testimonies of current stateless individuals and people formerly at risk of statelessness in Senegal
- **[10 years to end statelessness](#)** : A film on the historic regional conference on statelessness, in February 2015 in Abidjan.
- **[Ali](#)** : Testimony of a stateless man in Cote d'Ivoire
- **[Clementine](#)** : Testimony of a young stateless woman in Cote d'Ivoire

STATELESSNESS IN THE NEWS

- Fight against Statelessness in West Africa, Consultative Conference in Abidjan: <http://kora.unhcr.org/fight-statelessness-west-africa/>
- Graffiti artists get involved in the fight against statelessness to a tune of rap: <http://kora.unhcr.org/graffiti-artists-get-involved-fight-statelessness-tune-rap/>
- Campaign to end Statelessness in West Africa (French): <http://www.lequotidien.sn/index.php/component/k2/campagne-contre-l-apatridie-en-afrique-de-l-ouest-le-hcr-enthousiaste>
- UNHCR takes stock of its activities one year after the launch of its global campaign to end statelessness (French): http://www.sudonline.sn/le-hcr-fait-le-bilan-de-ses-activites-un-an-apres-lancement-en-2014_a_27015.html
- UNHCR report reveals debilitating impact of statelessness on children: <http://kora.unhcr.org/unhcr-report-reveals-debilitating-impact-statelessness-children/>
- A life of isolation and exclusion for stateless children: <http://kora.unhcr.org/life-isolation-exclusion-stateless-children/>



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sendawas@unhcr.org