

Statelessness Unit Update: February 2014, UNHCR Regional Representation for West Africa

Key achievements in 2013

Last year the UNHCR's Statelessness Unit based in Dakar conducted 3 major training events on statelessness. Two of the workshops, gathering country teams of government and NGO representatives, resulted in concrete action plans to address gaps in West African countries' nationality laws so that they were better harmonized with international standards. The third, the roundtable event in The Gambia, resulted in the adoption of the Banjul Appeal. The Appeal specifically calls upon various stakeholders, including states, to take specific measures in the field of statelessness in particular to adopt and domesticate the statelessness conventions. This appeal is the first of its kind in Africa.

Photo: Participants of the Banjul roundtable group



In addition, UNHCR directly contributed to preventing and reducing statelessness by working closely with a number of West African states. Côte d'Ivoire ratified both statelessness conventions and deposited the instruments of ratification in September in 2013. The Gambian parliament approved the adoption of both Conventions in December 2013 and the instruments of ratification are due to be deposited in the near future. Furthermore, in June 2013, Senegal revised its nationality legislation and removed some of its discriminatory provisions in view of preventing statelessness such as the right for a woman to give her nationality to her children. In September 2013, Côte d'Ivoire, a country with one of the largest stateless population in Africa, revised its legislation in order to reduce statelessness. The amendment provides for facilitated and expedited mechanisms for the acquisition of nationality by a large group of the population affected by statelessness. This is the first step towards finding permanent solutions for this group.

In 2013, UNHCR also explored new partnerships with regional institutions, and provided inputs on their plans of action. As such, ECOWAS and the Mano River Union (MRU) introduced the fight against statelessness in their strategies. The African Court of Justice on Human and Peoples' Rights also expressed its desire to contribute to UNHCR's work on statelessness.

Finally, in terms of getting a more in-depth understanding of statelessness on a country level, last year UNHCR embarked on concrete identification of statelessness by conducting research studies in a few selected countries. These were Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The results of these studies evidence that statelessness is a relevant issue for West African Countries and, as a result, will form the

basis of UNHCR's awareness raising materials on statelessness.

Achievements reported by other partners

Following the roundtable meeting in Banjul, a representative of one of our key partners, the National Commission for Human Rights in Mali, spoke in front of the Prime Minister of Mali, the President of the National Assembly of Mali and an international court of honor on the issue of statelessness. Mr Cheick Oumar Coulibaly informed the audience of the existence and the reasons for statelessness in West Africa, calling for the government, civil society organizations, law makers and UNHCR to take adequate measures to prevent statelessness as it could be a source of instability in Mali and in the region. A document of the speech is available upon request.

Activities requiring co-ordination with partners in 2014

Building on partnerships will be key to our work in 2014 as we recognize that, being a question of rights and one that is not well understood, statelessness is best addressed through a holistic approach. We count on Human Rights actors to support every individual's access to nationality, we rely on Civil Society groups and NGOs to empower individuals and inform them on how to exercise their rights and we depend on the media to send clear messages on what statelessness means and how it relates to an individual. In light of this, we are organizing a two-day NGO training in April and a one-day media workshop in the same month. Finally, we have been given the honour of organizing the first ever regional ministerial conference on statelessness in June in Cote D'Ivoire. To make the most of this important occasion, we wish to use the input of all our key collaborators in order to inform how countries in the region can take concrete steps to reducing statelessness and protecting stateless persons.

In addition to these events, we plan on elaborating on the above mentioned country studies as well as embarking on new research of a more thematic nature, such as on migration and statelessness. It is our understanding that with improved knowledge of statelessness situations and risk factors in the region, we will be better equipped to make plans for addressing these, be this through registration of stateless persons or changes in legislation to reduce statelessness. In these efforts we once again rely on knowledge and experience from those working with stateless persons.

Finally, we want to put our ideas into action. Where governments have pledged to accede to the Statelessness Conventions, harmonize their national laws with international standards and take measures to ensure that residents in their countries can make the most of these opportunities, we want to make sure this happens. UNHCR will liaise closely with country offices to monitor progress made in light of these efforts but we need partners to assist us by following up on progress on a local level, putting pressure on relevant institutions where recommendations are not followed up and raising awareness on changes in legislation so communities are aware of a change in their rights.

How can you help?

Firstly, you can help us by providing us with information relating to statelessness within your countries. This could be anything including letting us know about the formation of a new NGO or network dealing with nationality issues to telling us about events where we could provide expertise on statelessness in

order to influence opinion. Please feel free to email us with any relevant information.

Secondly, you can help us by contributing to our efforts to raise awareness on statelessness more generally. If you have something to say on statelessness we will use our networks to publicise it, and if we have something to say about statelessness we hope you will do the same. We have set up a twitter account @statelessnessWA and a web-sharing platform www.statelessapatride.wordpress.org where we publish all key information relating to statelessness in West Africa. In addition we link up to the Statelessness Unit in Geneva who also use the UNHCR website, Refworld and Facebook to communicate on statelessness.

Thirdly, we want to create a common voice for important initiatives and messages. For example, if there is a consensus reached on the key obstacles towards acquiring nationality in West Africa and we agree on a number of recommendations, the message will be more powerful if more actors are involved in endorsing and disseminating it. We would like to create such messages in light of the regional ministerial meeting and other international events this year.

What now?

Please send us an email in reply to this to confirm your willingness to be part of the Statelessness West Africa mailing list. At the same time, you may want to tell us of any important advancements, stories or obstacles you have experienced relating to statelessness in your countries of operation.

When UNHCR's statelessness unit has an update on activities or opportunities for the mailing list members, we will email you giving you all necessary information.

We sincerely hope that you are interested in joining us this year to carry on our efforts to make statelessness a more visible issue.