

PLACE

Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

DATE

7 May 2019

Eradicating statelessness in West Africa: ECOWAS, UNHCR and Côte d'Ivoire celebrate the 2nd anniversary of the Banjul Plan of Action.

Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire – This week, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the Government of Côte d'Ivoire are celebrating the second anniversary of the Banjul Plan of Action, which was adopted in 2017 by ECOWAS Member States to eradicate statelessness in West Africa.

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

Statelessness is caused by, among others, gaps in and conflicts of nationality laws, as well as State succession. The lack of birth registration and the lack of access to birth certificates also increase the risk of statelessness.

Since the 2014 launch of UNHCR's #IBelong Campaign to End Statelessness by 2024, West African states have made significant progress in terms of political commitment and concrete actions within the ECOWAS region.

In May 2017, West Africa became the first region worldwide to adopt a binding action plan (the Banjul Plan of Action), testimony of ECOWAS Member States' commitment to end statelessness. Through the Banjul Plan of Action, the fifteen ECOWAS countries pledged to translate into concrete and measurable actions the Abidjan Declaration of February 2015, adopted by the Heads of ECOWAS Member States to eradicate statelessness in West Africa.

Among the commendable achievements in the fight against statelessness in West Africa, Benin, Burkina Faso, the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Togo have adopted National Action Plans to end statelessness. In August 2017, Burkina Faso acceded to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, bringing to twelve the number of States in the region that are party to the 1954 and 1961 Statelessness Conventions. In 2018 alone, Niger issued birth certificates to more than four million people. Burkina Faso finalized a major study on statelessness, which makes recommendations that form the starting point for a series of administrative and legislative measures to eradicate statelessness. In Côte d'Ivoire, a countrywide mapping exercise took place in 2018 and special laws were adopted in November 2018 to facilitate access to civil status documents. Such positive actions have been undertaken or are underway in most States of the region.

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The #IBelong Campaign to End Statelessness will reach its mid-point this year. On this occasion, UNHCR will convene a global event, the High-Level Segment on Statelessness, in Geneva on 7 October. As part of UNHCR's overall efforts to end statelessness by 2024, this regional strategic meeting in Abidjan will provide an opportunity for the statelessness focal points of Governments, UNHCR and the ECOWAS Commission to share best practices on policies, administrative procedures and legal frameworks, showcase achievements, and finalize pledges ahead of the High-Level Segment.

"The High-Level Segment on Statelessness will provide an opportunity for West Africa to demonstrate its laudable leadership and solidarity, not only through the durable solutions provided to refugees, but also in delivering on their commitment to end statelessness," said Liz Ahua, UNHCR Regional Representative for West Africa.

In this regard, it is important that government officials responsible for statelessness in the ECOWAS region and their ECOWAS, NGO and UNHCR counterparts are currently meeting in Abidjan to prepare West Africa's participation in the High-Level Segment, in order to highlight the achievements accomplished in line with the Banjul Plan of Action and the global campaign to eradicate statelessness. Yesterday, UNHCR's Representative in Côte d'Ivoire, Mohamed Toure, and Ambassador Babacar Carlos Mbaye, Resident Representative of ECOWAS to Côte d'Ivoire, co-chaired the anniversary celebration of the Banjul Plan of Action.

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 actions 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 Segment on Statelessness

In October this year, States and other actors will be invited to Geneva to participate in a High-Level Segment 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 have not been able to complete by 2019, but which they commit to undertaking by the end of the Campaign in 2024.

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