



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, U.S. House of Representatives

**“Protecting the Persecuted: The Successes and Challenges of  
Safeguarding Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons and Stateless  
Persons”**

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Chairman McGovern, Chairman Wolf, and members of the Commission, thank you for this opportunity to commemorate the anniversaries of the Refugee and Statelessness Conventions, and to discuss the situation of displaced and stateless persons globally.

Refugees International (RI) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and refugees in some of the most difficult parts of the world. Based here in Washington, we conduct 20 to 25 field missions per year to places like Sudan, Kuwait, Libya and Burma. We do not accept government or United Nations funding, which allows our advocacy to be impartial and independent.

Every refugee and stateless person has a unique story to tell – a story of oppression and abuse, of fear and flight. Just yesterday I was told about a nine-year-old child, Berlina Celsa, in the Dominican Republic. A month ago she was kidnapped, raped and murdered. The man charged with the crime was ordered to pay a five thousand peso bond to secure release from jail. When Berlina’s lawyer protested the miniscule bond amount, the judge said Berlina did not exist – that she did not exist legally because she was stateless. Although born in the Dominican Republic, making her a citizen of the country at the time of her birth, in 2010 the government amended its nationality law and applied it retroactively, denationalizing hundreds of thousands of people born to parents who were not legally residing in the Dominican Republic at the time of their birth.

The growing number of displaced and stateless people is neither a temporary problem nor the random product of chance events. It is the predictable consequence of human rights abuses, the result of decisions made by individuals who wield power over people’s lives.

Too much of the time, governments pay lip service to the rights of refugees and the stateless while in practice devoting their energies to keeping refugees away from their borders and defining, or re-defining, individuals out of existence.

If governments fulfilled their responsibilities – if they protected their citizens instead of persecuting or depriving them of nationality – then millions of women, men and children would not have to gamble on an uncertain future, and those in exile could return home safely.

By investing in the international organizations that provide the only life-line to millions of refugees and stateless persons, the United States demonstrates a commitment to their safety and security. Particularly in the case of the stateless – individuals who often live for decades without nationality, access to their human rights, or any legal protection – the UNHCR and other international organizations may be the only agencies providing food, education and health care, and continued US support to these agencies at current or increased levels is vital. Refugees International anticipates that PRM, the US agency focused on the protection of displaced and stateless people, will remain a forceful voice encouraging UNHCR field offices to meaningfully engage with stateless populations.

It is critical that Members of Congress continue to support the human rights protection of refugees, internally displaced and stateless people by directly engaging with other nations, encouraging them to raise the profile of the more than 12 million stateless people globally, and urging them to alter their nationality laws if they prohibit women from transmitting nationality to their children. Last week Refugees International released a report on Kuwait, where approximately 100,000 bidoun reside and women do not have the right to convey nationality to their children. When a Kuwaiti woman marries a stateless bidoun, both her husband and children will be stateless, lack access to education, health care, and registration of the most basic of milestones in a person's life: birth, marriage and death. Members of Congress should take the concrete step of crafting and sending a letter to the Kuwaiti national assembly that urges Kuwait to amend its nationality law so that it is no longer discriminatory against women, and provides nationality to the bidoun in their territory, who are no different in language, culture or social customs.

Having just returned from Sudan and South Sudan, Refugees International is encouraged by the UNHCR's decision to place dedicated staff in both Khartoum and Juba focused exclusively on the prevention and reduction of statelessness. The UNHCR is facing a long-term assignment, requiring the US government's commitment to providing financial and technical support so that the Agency may continue to carry out this sensitive and complex effort. Refugees International anticipates that like in Sudan, in recently liberated nations, such as Libya, opportunities to prevent and reduce statelessness exist, but the creation of new refugee and stateless populations are also a possibility. Refugees International hopes that the US government and the UNHCR will encourage new governments to be inclusive of people on their territory and set aside what

are likely deep-seeded and difficult internal relationships so that the possibility of new stateless and refugee populations are reduced.

Today, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission and its co-chairs have given a voice to children like Berlina, whose grieving family is experiencing no less a profound loss, even if she had no legal identity. Refugees International urges Members of Congress to support UNHCR at current or increased levels, send a letter to the Kuwaiti parliament urging its members to support an amendment of Kuwaiti nationality laws, and make the prevention and reduction of statelessness a priority in all US diplomacy with newly liberated nations and those with long-standing refugee and stateless populations. Progress toward the protection of refugee and stateless populations has not been and will not be easy, but the key to progress is increased engagement globally by the UNHCR and the US government in partnership with other nations and organizations.