

**Testimony of Sarnata Reynolds, Senior Advisor on Human Rights, Refugees International  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, US House of Representatives  
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I would like to take this opportunity to thank Co-Chairs McGovern and Pitts, and the members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for this opportunity to discuss the lives of stateless persons and the profound suffering they endure because they do not have legal identities.

Refugees International (RI) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and the stateless in some of the most difficult parts of the world. Based here in Washington, we conduct 12 to 15 field missions per year to research displaced populations in locations such as South Sudan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, El Salvador, Mexico, and Turkey, where I just returned from last night. RI does not accept any government or United Nations funding, which allows our advocacy to be impartial and independent.

Every person has the right to a nationality and the violation of this right, resulting in statelessness, is both a cause and consequence of discrimination, exploitation, and forced displacement in all regions of the world. The use of ethnic or other identity markers to attribute nationality is common, and it may be the most frequent justification for denying the right to nationality, as a government asserts that a disfavored population does not reflect the nationality identity. The right to nationality is at risk when political change is taking place, targeted discrimination is occurring, laws of different nations' conflict, or governments abuse their sovereignty by withdrawing the nationality of political dissidents, among other reasons.

Being stateless means having no legal protection or rights to participate in political processes, inadequate access to social services, poor employment prospects, little opportunity to own property or travel, and few protections against trafficking, harassment, and violence. Statelessness also has a disproportionate impact on women and children.

Today I will illuminate each of these paths to statelessness by sharing the stories of individuals I have met throughout the world. I have changed their names to protect their identities. As we speak and share our views today, I hope we will all keep in mind that statelessness is a manmade phenomenon, and that it can be remedied by a commitment to fair nationality laws and policies.

Bilal is officially dead. I met him in Turkey last week, where RI was learning more about access to birth registration for Syrian refugees and the effectiveness of cross-border humanitarian assistance. Bilal defected from the Syrian military in 2012 and he was recorded as dead by the Syrian government in 2013. Just a few weeks ago he had a baby. Amina's a lovely, healthy little girl, but he can't register her birth because he does not legally exist. He had a birth certificate,

marriage certificate, a college degree, and a military ID, but all of them were destroyed when his house was demolished in Syria.

Sleep does not come easily to the parents of any newborn, but what keeps Bilal up at night is worrying about what will happen to his daughter if she does not get a birth certificate recording her birth, her name, and the names of her parents. Syria passes nationality through the father, but Amina's father is technically dead, and regardless, to register her would require that Bilal submit her birth report to the Syrian government in Istanbul. This is impossible because Bilal does not legally exist, and if his whereabouts were to become known, he is afraid that he would be identified by the Assad regime, located, and killed. So Amina will grow up without a birth certificate, at least for now, and she may be rendered stateless if the family cannot return to a peaceful Syria. Without citizenship, she may not be able to enroll in school, access health care, and perhaps most importantly, politically participate in a new Syria.

Unfortunately, in Syria thousands of other children may also be born stateless. Syrian doctors and other medical professionals who work in makeshift hospitals in Syria told us in Gaziantep that they were aware of hundreds of children who had been conceived after a woman was raped by an ISIS soldier. The soldier was likely not Syrian, his identity was unknown, and he will have no part in the lives of these children. Despite being born in Syria, without a Syrian father they may not acquire Syrian nationality.

Because of Syria's restrictive and discriminatory nationality law, it is likely that the number of stateless children, and those at risk of statelessness, will continue to grow. **Any negotiations toward a resolution of the civil war must include safeguards for these children and the adults who are alive and well but recorded as dead.**

About 5000 miles away, one million stateless Rohingya live in abject poverty and exclusion. Although almost all of them descend from families that lived in Myanmar even before its independence in 1961, they are a persecuted Muslim minority who were formally denationalized in 1982. More than 10 percent of the population lives in internal displacement camps that have become segregated and isolated ghettos. The rest live in villages in Rakhine State in Western Myanmar, but like the Rohingya in camps, they are not permitted to leave their villages nor are they allowed to work. Yet the government refuses to supply the Rohingya population with food or health care so they suffer from chronic and extreme malnutrition and they die from tuberculosis, in child birth, or as newborns. The United Nations and international humanitarian organizations are permitted to provide the Rohingya with food and health care at times but last year they were ordered to stop working for a few weeks, and the organization Doctors Without Borders was expelled for almost a year.

Because the U.S. suspended many of the previous sanctions held over the Myanmar government, there are few levers that would compel Myanmar to recognize the rights of the Rohingya to nationality. European nations and Myanmar's neighbors are doing very little to express concern for the rights of the Rohingya community. Still, US Ambassador Derek Mitchell

has shown leadership among the diplomatic community in Myanmar and his efforts should be commended.

Gulf States, including Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait are increasingly denationalizing political dissidents as a punishment for their protests and a warning to other would be activists. In the last three years Bahrain, has stripped the citizenship of more than 40 people due to their protests against the government's restrictions on expression and discrimination against minority communities. In July 2014, Bahrain amended its Citizenship Act to make it easier to revoke nationality. Now, the minister of interior, with the approval of the cabinet, can take this profound step if an individual is deemed to be causing "harm to the interests of the kingdom". In the past, the King himself had to approve the revocation after a criminal treason conviction.

There are hundreds of thousands of stateless people in the Gulf region, known as the "bidoon", the Arabic word for "without". In April 2013, the bidoon and their Kuwaiti supporters held the first-ever conference on statelessness in Kuwait, and I was honored to be asked to give the opening speech.

After the speech I met a Kuwaiti human rights activist named Amir who had been arrested 15 times since 1982. He took on many issues, one of which was the right of the more than 100,000 stateless Kuwaitis to nationality. After a trip to Qatar in 2002, where he was preparing a television program on stateless Kuwaitis, Amir was taken aside at Kuwait City airport and his passport was confiscated.

Being sequestered inside Kuwait has cost Amir dearly. He has missed the birth of all eight of his grandchildren because his children live overseas. The day I met him was his niece's birthday. A few days earlier, he brought his wife to the airport so she could travel to meet their newest grandchild, but he had to stay behind. Even his daughter, who lives just five hours away by car, is out of reach. Dozens of other activists throughout the Gulf have had their citizenship withdrawn for similar peaceful political and oppositional activities.

**At this time, when the U.S. has taken an unprecedented interest in preventing and eradicating statelessness, it should be pressing Gulf governments to promote and protect the right to nationality, and to refrain in all cases from withdrawing citizenship because of peaceful dissident activities.**

Neglecting the rights and struggles of stateless populations creates the perception that stateless people are not worthy of international protection. This neglect also creates a false impression that stateless populations do not find themselves in as desperate a situation as refugees and the internally displaced (an experience they often share individually and in forced migration). Treated as a lesser concern, governments such as Myanmar are facilitated in their refusal to provide UN agencies and humanitarian organizations access to stateless populations in harrowing conditions, compounding misery and emboldening bad actors to do worse.

**If the right to nationality was recognized as a stand-alone human right, rather than perceived as included in and an extension of a State's authority to determine who may be recognized as a citizen, influential States could raise concerns about violations without being immediately charged of transgressing state sovereignty. In that way, challenging a State's denial of the right to nationality could be seen not as an exercise in piercing state sovereignty, but instead an exercise in human rights diplomacy, no different than challenges related to the treatment of women and children, freedom of speech, or conditions in jails - all of which governments routinely articulate in a variety of forums.**

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to your questions.