

Interpress Service: Dozens of Minority Ethnic Groups Lack Citizenship Rights

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WASHINGTON, Feb 15 (IPS) - At least 11 million people worldwide are "international orphans" -- people without citizenship or nationality -- who suffer discrimination, exploitation, and, in some cases, forced displacement, according to a new report by Refugees International (RI).

The 52-page report, which examines in detail the problems of stateless minorities in three countries, Bangladesh, Estonia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), argues that the issue touches every region in the world and, in some cases, threatens international stability.

For example, as many as 400,000 Banyamulenge, ethnic Tutsis whose forbears moved to what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) several centuries ago, do not enjoy citizenship. Efforts by various forces in the DRC over the last six years to depict them as agents of Rwanda have contributed to communal violence in South Kivu province over that period that has taken hundreds of thousands of lives.

Similarly, many Kurds, who live mainly in Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq, have also been deprived of full citizenship rights in each of those countries from time to time, and as many as 300,000 still deprived of citizenship and banned from public-sector employment in Syria, while some four million Palestinians scattered throughout the Arab world are officially stateless.

According to the report, the situation for stateless people has actually deteriorated since the Sep. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against New York and the Pentagon, with many governments citing the threat of terrorism to justify draconian policies against stateless minorities.

Despite several U.N. conventions that require member-states to try to resolve the plight of stateless individuals, very little has been done. Indeed, the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees has allocated only two staff positions to deal with the issue despite the magnitude of the problem, according to the report, "Lives on Hold: The Human Cost of Statelessness".

As a result, stateless people often fall through the cracks of the international relief and protection systems. While they probably constitute less than one-tenth of the world's 175 million so-called "non-citizens," who include refugees, economic and non-economic migrants, and temporary residents, such as students, and undocumented immigrants, stateless individuals not only are ignored or denied minimum rights by their host governments, but they also find it difficult to draw international attention to their plight.

The 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons defines them as people "who (are not considered) as a national by any state under the operation of its law." The UNCHR defines a stateless person as someone who is "not recognised by any country as a citizen."

A 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness calls on all countries to cooperate in providing citizenship to those who have none. That convention, however, has been ratified by only

29 countries, none of which has large number of stateless people. The United States has not ratified either Convention, although it has ratified the Universal Declaration of Rights, which guarantees every person the right to a nationality.

In addition to the Banymulenge, the Kurds and the Palestinians, the groups that suffer the highest rates of statelessness include individuals from the former Soviet bloc, some of Thailand's Hill Tribes, the Bhutanese in Nepal, Muslim minorities in Burma and Sri Lanka, Europe's Roma people, the Bidoon in Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, the Batwa "Pygmy" in the DRC, the Bihari and Rohingya in Bangladesh, some Meskhetian Turks, and Zimbabweans of Indian descent or with links to Malawi and Mozambique.

In Bangladesh, RI representatives visited 11 of the 55 camps where more than 250,000 Biharis, Urdu-speaking Muslims in Bihar who fled to East Pakistan at the time of partition and were then stranded after Bangladesh's independence in 1971, have been living under harsh and "severely overcrowded" conditions. Both Pakistan and Bangladesh have rejected appeals to grant them citizenship.

Not only are the conditions of life unusually severe, but health care and access to clean water are very limited, according to the report. Little employment is available inside or outside the camps, while "(f)or Bihari children, the right to education has become a luxury." Often, the only way out of the camps is for residents to marry local Bangladeshis, according to the report.

While the material circumstances of the approximately 160,000 Russian-speaking minority residents in Estonia are much better, they also suffer discrimination based on language and the identification of Russians with the Soviet occupation, according to the report.

To acquire citizenship, applicants must pass Estonian language and constitution exams, but, given the social segregation that exists between the two groups, it is very difficult for Russians to develop adequate skills.

The Estonian government has taken some steps over the past decade to provide citizenship to long-term Russian residents, particularly to children born after 1992, but the government has dragged its feet over signing the 1954 and 1961 Conventions that facilitate the process.

In the UAE, about 100,000 Bidoon, which means persons without nationality, consist primarily of two groups -- Arabs from neighbouring countries and non-Arabs, including people whose ancestors settled in the Gulf generations ago as merchants or workers.

While the Bidoon are not subject to deportation, they face discrimination in employment, education, and medical care. As a result, most live in poverty in urban shantytowns waiting for their status to be resolved. "We are like a boat without a port," one Bidoon told RI.

What is common to all three groups is an "ongoing sense of abandonment by the international community, lack of equal employment opportunities and related socio-economic hardship, violation of human rights that included access to basic education, freedom of movement, access to political processes, and the need for rapid resolution to each situation, possibly to be achieved with international pressure," according to the report.

"In each case, many years, even generations, have passed since lives were put on hold," said RI, which called for the UNCHR, as well as the countries involved, to move the issue closer to the top of the international agenda. (END/2005)

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