Statelessness in numbers: 2018

An overview and analysis of global statistics

June 2018

This note offers an overview and analysis of UNHCR's global statelessness statistics for 2017, published in June 2018 in its annual "Global Trends" report at: www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2017/. The complete country-by-country data on persons under UNHCR's statelessness mandate is published in "Table 7", which can be downloaded here http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/17-WRD-table-7.xls.[1] A technical note and glossary is provided on the last page.

Summary of key findings

What stands out most and receives extensive explanation in this year's Global Trends report is that UNHCR has "exceptionally" reported Rohingya refugee and IDP populations in Bangladesh and Myanmar in both its displacement and statelessness statistics, because of the massive forced displacement of this population during 2017. This means that at the end of 2017, a total of more than 1.5 million Rohingya are visible in the data reported on statelessness, whereas at the start of 2017 only 925,000 Rohingya were counted within the statelessness statistics because previously those who had already been forcibly displaced were included in refugee and IDP data, but were excluded from the statelessness numbers to avoid counting people twice. However, Rohingya refugees and displaced persons in other countries (India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Thailand etc.) are still not included; nor are other stateless refugee populations.

A total of 56,500 stateless people in 29 countries acquired nationality during 2017. However, an estimated 70,000 children are born into statelessness each year, meaning that the number of new cases of children born stateless was higher than the number of existing cases of statelessness that were resolved. Structural change to prevent intergenerational statelessness is needed for meaningful reduction to happen.

Last year, the figures reported for the Dominican Republic and Zimbabwe were removed from the global statistical reporting, leading then to a drop of almost half a million in the total number of stateless persons captured in the global statistics collated by UNHCR. This year, while no new data has been reported – footnotes indicate that data collection efforts are ongoing – both countries have been marked with an asterisk (*), rather than a dash (-). This is vitally important because it ensures the acknowledgement, at least, that there is a significant stateless population in the country, but that reliable data is not currently available.

What is the global picture?

UNHCR estimates there to be at least 10 million stateless people around the world. This is a figure which remains unchanged from previous years' statistical reporting. Of this number, at the end of 2017, only 3.9 million stateless people were "captured" in the data published by UNHCR. Measuring the true scale of statelessness remains a challenge, both methodologically and politically – a fact which this most recent Global Trends report once again acknowledges, recalling that improving quantitative and qualitative data on stateless populations is one of the actions of UNHCR's Global Action Plan to End Statelessness (GAP). The estimate of 10 million stateless persons globally does not account for all persons who meet the definition of a stateless person under international law.[2] UNHCR's statistical reporting on statelessness focuses on persons who do not also have what the Global Trends report describes as "another reportable status" (e.g. as

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[1] Unless indicated otherwise, all data reported in this note is drawn directly from the 2017 Global Trends report and its accompanying Table 7.
[2] A stateless person is someone who "is not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law". Article 1 of the 1954 Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons.

refugees, IDPs or asylum seekers) – although this year there has been some change to this approach, as set out below. Stateless Palestine refugees who receive assistance from UNRWA are also not counted. Taking this into account, in an extensive review of publicly available data relating to statelessness globally in 2014, the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion (ISI) estimated the total figure for the number of people living without a nationality in the world today to be at least 15 million.[3] There is nothing to suggest that there has since been any major global shift in these aggregate numbers.

How has the picture changed in the last year?

As mentioned above, data reported by UNHCR for the year 2017 captures 3.9 million stateless people globally. This is an increase as compared to the previous year, where a total of 3.2 million stateless people were recorded in the statistics. The shift is not necessarily caused by a growth in the overall number of people now living without a nationality, but by the increased "visibility" of some stateless populations, in particular the Rohingya from Myanmar. Due to crimes against humanity being inflicted on the Rohingya in Rakhine State, hundreds of thousands were forced to flee their homes in 2017. Over 650,000 crossed the border to Bangladesh, joining a large existing Rohingya (unrecognized) refugee population there and bringing the total estimated tally of stateless Rohingya refugees in the country to 932,204. Further, more than 125,000 Rohingya have been internally displaced within Myanmar for a number of years, while the number of non-displaced stateless Rohingya in Myanmar has dropped to an estimated 470,000. Providing an accurate picture of the situation of this displaced stateless community is a challenge for UNHCR due to its long-standing practice of counting persons of concerns only once – as refugees, asylum seekers, IDPs or stateless persons. The upshot of this would be the "disappearance" of all but 470,000 stateless Rohingya from the statistical reporting on statelessness, which could be wrongly construed as the resolution of a large number of cases. Instead, in this year's Global Trends, UNHCR has "exceptionally" reported Rohingya refugee and IDP populations in Bangladesh and Myanmar in both its displacement and statelessness statistics.

The context set out above must be understood in order to situate this year's data and how this relates to previous annual statistics. The table below shows the figures for the ten largest reported stateless populations in the world over the last three years. As can be seen, the mass displacement of stateless Rohingya to Bangladesh and the decision to exceptionally report Rohingya refugees within the statelessness data, has led to Bangladesh being propelled to the top of the list. If the figures for Bangladesh and Myanmar are combined, the total exceeds 1.5 million, which was greater than the number of stateless Rohingya reported in previous years. This is due to also including the long-term displaced Rohingya within Bangladesh and Myanmar in the statistics (who had previously been excluded). However, Rohingya refugees in other countries (India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Thailand etc.) are still not included.

End of 2017	End of 2016	End of 2015
Bangladesh* (932,204)	Myanmar (925,939)	Myanmar (938,000)
Côte d'Ivoire (692,000)	Côte d'Ivoire (694,000)	Côte d'Ivoire (700,000)
Myanmar* (621,763)	Thailand (487,741)	Thailand (443,862)
Thailand (486,440)	Latvia (242,736)	Zimbabwe (300,000)
Latvia (233,571)	Syrian Arab Republic (160,000)	Latvia (252,195)
Syrian Arab Republic (160,000)	Kuwait (93,000)	Syrian Arab Republic (160,000)
Kuwait (92,000)	Russian Federation (90,771)	Dominican Republic (133,770)
Uzbekistan (85,555)	Uzbekistan (86,524)	Russian Federation (101,813)
Russian Federation (82,148)	Estonia (82,585)	Kuwait (93,000)
Estonia (80,314)	Saudi Arabia (70,000)	Uzbekistan (86,703)

* In Bangladesh, the figure includes stateless Rohingya refugees; in Myanmar the figure includes stateless Rohingya IDPs.

[3] Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, *The World's Stateless,* 2014, available at http://www.institutesi.org/worldsstateless.pdf.

In terms of other changes to the global statelessness picture in 2017, the table above shows that these are rather minor. As in previous years, we continue to see large-scale statelessness in countries across the world. Côte d'Ivoire, Thailand, Latvia, Syria and Kuwait remain effectively in the same positions in the table – i.e. behind the Rohingya community from Myanmar. The combined tally for these five countries has dropped slightly since the previous year, but only by 0.8% (or 13,466 people). Together, the countries with the ten largest stateless populations for which data has been reported accounted for 90% of the overall number of stateless people who were counted in 2017: 3.47 million out of 3.9 million.

Two countries which could previously be found among the ten with the largest number of stateless people are Zimbabwe and the Dominican Republic. Last year, the figures reported for both of these countries were removed from the global statistical reporting, leading then to a drop of almost half a million in the total number of stateless persons captured in the global statistics collated by UNHCR.[4] It was explained that new data collection was ongoing in both countries which would lead to the publication of updated figures. This year, while no new data has been reported – footnotes continue to indicate that data collection efforts are ongoing – both countries have been marked with an asterisk (*), rather than a dash (-). This is vitally important because it ensures the acknowledgement, at least, that there is a significant stateless population in the country, but that reliable data is not currently available.

Are the numbers going up, or down?

According to data available to UNHCR a total of 56,500 stateless people in 29 countries acquired nationality during 2017. The Global Trends report notes that "significant reductions" occurred in the Philippines (see further below), the Russian Federation, Sweden, Tajikistan and Thailand. However, UNHCR has previously estimated that in the five largest non-refugee statelessness situations alone, 70,000 children are born into statelessness each year. This means that, as was also the case in 2016,[5] the number of new cases of children born stateless was higher than the number of existing cases of statelessness that were resolved.

This is before considering the question of how many people were rendered newly stateless during the year. UNHCR's global data does not include a figure for Bahrain, for example, where over seven hundred people have reportedly been stripped of their nationality since 2012, many being rendered stateless, with additional risk of statelessness for their children.[6]

At the individual country level, the data suggests that resolving existing cases is not necessarily having a real impact on the scale of the problem. In Thailand, the story of the Wild Boars football team who were trapped in Tham Luang cave has thrown a spotlight on the country's long-standing situation of statelessness in recent weeks. The coach and three of the boys are stateless. Thailand is one of the countries named by UNHCR as a site of significant reduction in statelessness, with 11,000 stateless people reportedly able to confirm their nationality in 2017. However, this has had little impact on the overall numbers, which reduced by just 1,300 over the course of the year. With a total stateless population at year end of over 480,000 people, if cases continue to be resolved at this rate, many people will still have to wait a long time for nationality.

This demonstrates that unless existing cases can be resolved more quickly, for meaningful reduction to be achieved, breaking the cycle of inherited statelessness is critical. States should be held to their obligations under international law (including the CRC) and structural change pursued.

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[4] See further Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, *Newly updated statistics reveal ongoing challenges in measuring the issue,* 28 June 2017, available at: http://www.institutesi.org/news/UNHCR-global-trends_2017.php.

[5] Ibid.

[6] See, for instance, Salam for Democracy and Human Rights website, *I am Bahraini,* where cases are monitored (https://www.anabahraini.org/).

What else does the data tell us?

A closer look at the data allows for some interesting observations to be made about global trends in terms of statelessness numbers and also gives some insight into the situation in individual countries. Here are some key observations:

- **Statistical coverage has yet to significantly improve.**
  As the graph in this year's Global Trends report shows, we have yet to see a major breakthrough in global statistical coverage of statelessness. 75 countries reported what was considered to be reliable data, while 23 countries were marked with an asterisk (*) as having known significant populations, without reliable data.[7]

- **Statelessness now flagged as an issue in Afghanistan and Venezuela.**
  Notable new "asterisk countries" in this year's reporting, are Afghanistan and Venezuela. No further information is given, but concern about civil documentation and the risk of statelessness for some groups from these countries has been flagged elsewhere, including in the context of the large-scale displacement.[8]

- **Data reported for the first time for Australia and Canada.**
  Neither country has previously had statelessness data in UNHCR's global statistics. As of the end of 2017, Australia reports 52 stateless people and Canada 3,790 stateless people. The exact source of the data is not indicated, but a variety of research initiatives have been taken up in both countries in recent years.[9]

- **Numbers are down in the Philippines, but up in Viet Nam.**
  Over the past few years, thanks to government efforts to first better map and subsequently find solutions for people who faced nationality problems in the Philippines, the size of the (mapped) stateless population has been going down. During 2017, the number further reduced, from 4,636 at the start of the year to 2,678 at the end – with a total of 6,072 persons of Indonesian descent now being confirmed as Filipino, Indonesian or dual nationals. In Viet Nam, however, the stateless population reported at year end was far larger than at the start of 2017: going from 11,000 to 29,522. This may be attributable to further mapping, rather than a growth in actual numbers affected by statelessness, but no details are provided to explain the change.

- **97 people recognized as stateless in the United Kingdom between 2013-2016**
  In some cases, the data collated provides an interesting insight into domestic policy and procedures. In the UK, for instance, a dedicated Statelessness Determination Procedure was introduced in 2014. Since then, the statistical reporting has been based on who was recognised as stateless under this procedure. By the end of 2017, that was a total of 97 people.

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[7] Note that in the previous year's statistics, there were also 75 countries reporting data on statelessness, so this remained constant. In fact, two new countries were added this year – Australia and Canada (see further on this page). But two countries also stopped reporting data: Egypt (26 stateless persons reported at the start of 2017, replaced with an asterisk (*) at the end of 2017) and Nicaragua (1 stateless person reported at the start of 2017, replaced with a dash (-) at the end of 2017).

[8] See, for instance, UNHCR Supplementary Appeal, *Venezuela Situation: Responding to the needs of people displaced from Venezuela,* 2018, available at: http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/unhcr%20venezuela%20situation%202018%20supplementary%20appeal.pdf.

[9] See, for instance, Canadian Centre on Statelessness, *Data Collection on Stateless Persons in Canada,* March 2017, available at: http://www.statelessness.ca/uploads/3/1/9/0/31903945/ccs_data_collection_2017.pdf; Refugee Council of Australia, *Statelessness in Australia,* August 2015, available at: https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/1508-Statelessness.pdf; and the establishment of the Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness at Melbourne Law School (https://law.unimelb.edu.au/centres/statelessness).

A more comprehensive statistical regime?

The mass displacement of the stateless Rohingya population from Myanmar and the exceptional approach adopted by UNHCR to try to provide clarity of data in its annual report reaffirm just how challenging the question of numbers is. According to this year's Global Trends report, UNHCR "is currently reviewing its statistical reporting". It is, indeed, remarkable that as a group, the Rohingya have become more visible in terms of their statelessness, due to this latest wave of mass displacement. At the start of 2017, only 925,000 Rohingya were counted within the statelessness statistics – while others, who had already been forcibly displaced were included in refugee and IDP data, but were excluded from the statelessness numbers in order to avoid people being counted twice. Now, a total of more than 1.5 million Rohingya are visible in the data reported on statelessness, because those displaced within Myanmar and to Bangladesh have been included. Yet, Rohingya refugees elsewhere in the world are not (yet) captured in the statelessness statistics; nor are other stateless refugee populations, such as stateless Kurds displaced from Syria, or Palestine refugees under the UNRWA mandate. To report data on stateless refugees for the purposes of having a more comprehensive picture of the number of stateless people worldwide, will require not only a change to how data is collated and issued annually by UNHCR, but likely also improved efforts to identify statelessness among refugee populations, and find suitable durable solutions for them.

Technical note & glossary

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) releases statistics on the scale of the problem of forced displacement worldwide in its annual "Global Trends" report. Since 2004, these reports have included data on statelessness. UNHCR is the only body that systematically collates and publishes figures for the number of stateless persons globally. The data itself is drawn from a range of sources, including both government data and statistics gathered through UN, academic or civil society data collection. Within its statistical reporting on statelessness, UNHCR uses two different symbols to indicate where data is absent:

An **asterisk** (*) is used to mark countries where UNHCR has information about stateless persons but no reliable data.

A **dash** (-) is used to mark countries where there is no data or the value is zero.

For more on how UNHCR compiles and reports data on statelessness, as well as more generally on the challenges of measuring statelessness, see Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, *The World's Stateless,* 2014, available at http://www.institutesi.org/worldsstateless.pdf; and Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, 'Counting the world's stateless: reflections on statistical reporting on statelessness' in UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2013, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/54cf99f29.pdf.