

## MY STORY AS A VOLUNTEER IN A GREEK CAMP IN RITSONA

From the very first moment you – a stranger – enter the community of Ritsona, you feel accepted. People see an unknown face, I see all new faces, but no need for awkward silences or elaborate ice-breakers. Being part of an established and well-respected charity group called 'ECHO100Plus' is enough. They know why you are there, a guest in their home to help out a bit. Soon plenty know your name, with or without a name tag. Of course it helps if you have a name that resembles an Arabic word, especially one so frequently used to request someone to hurry up. As you can imagine it is a reason for laughter, yet very few need one to smile.

Humans who have witnessed and gone through the worst continue to amaze me. Even more so as they are trapped in a place nobody wants to be. People are joking, patiently waiting while we assemble their food, which is not that good. I can best compare it to airplane food, but even that is a stretch at times. Admittedly it could be a lot worse in general since there is enough fruit, Arabic bread and water for everyone on a daily basis. People are grateful, kindhearted, courteous, warm and hospitable to say the least. Behind all of this there is of course anger, anxiety, frustration, helplessness, hopelessness and indifference. It's a mix of emotions and thoughts after being in this confusing little world far away from everything else.

At times, the negative emotions come out as well and we just try to be understanding and hopefully not make it worse. This is hard sometimes, but we know it's rarely personal and the reaction has little to do with what we did or did not do. I'd do the same if I'd get the same food almost every single day, get told I cannot have an orange for my child because the cutoff age is 3 or another salad because tonight you decided we can have only one per house. Most people understand we are not in charge, it is the army / air force and we hand out as much as we can but are forced to give out per person / child / baby due to the numbers. I'm still surprised though that people often accept our explanation.

While our main task as Echo volunteers is food distribution, we also do hygiene and clothes distribution. In my first week we have had a few break-ins, which were frustrating but we did not let it get us down. People were upset about it too and of course agreed it was not right. We had it fixed every single time. We left the clothes for what they were since it was a mess every morning and they were clearly looking for something, at some point there is no point. This also counts for the perpetrators and what they took, which included some clothes but also nappies, diabetic bread, dog food, diapers and such. The items seemed random so it was almost funny. Luckily it stopped and we are currently in the process of getting a solid wall.

Partly thanks to Lighthouse Relief and some of their amazing team members we managed to solidify the wall in the meantime. Aside from their carpentry skills, they run a child and woman friendly space. There is also I am You who run educational programs. Then we have the big ones UNHCR, IOM and Red Cross. The main difference is we are there on all 7 days, pretty much for 12 hours (9-21) straight and is pretty much front and center as you enter the camp. Just like on Leros, it seems that responsibility and cooperation between all of the parties involved is the biggest challenge to give the residents the best help they can get.

Luckily, Ritsonians understand that we are limited due to politics and money. However, as this place was supposed to be temporary, some have now been here for about a year! That is unacceptable. Standing in line twice a day for your food, then waiting for that one day when you can get coffee, tea, some wet wipes – which are not to be handed out due to clogging of pipes – and waiting for opening hours to see a doctor. Ritsona is deemed one of the better camps, probably because they live in isoboxes (caravans / mobile homes) with heating, a stove, toilet and shower. Can you imagine this being your life though?

There is a good vibe in the camp regardless of what is going on. The 2nd or 3rd day after a tragic loss of life was probably one of the most positive and vibrant days yet. The sun was shining, people were up and about, children in the playground. People have probably already been through so much that the death of a baby is not that shocking. Staying positive is also a way to deal with it of course. I have no explanation for it and I know it sounds weird,

but it's the truth. Of course I mean no disrespect. The loss for me was a reminder of how fragile life is, how horrible living in a place like this must be, especially when going through something tragic as a family. Hearing other people's stories about their lives in Syria and how they feel about living here is also a reality check.

Ritsona, a surreal and very real place at the same time. In the words of a young man: "If I was human, they would not put me in a place like this". Most of my time here has been positive and it's all because of the group we have and the residents of Ritsona. There is a ritual you have to pass before you can be fully accepted and you will not see it coming. See there is an old man in his sixties / seventies nicknamed 'Baba' who usually hangs around the warehouse before food distribution. The first time I saw him someone had already spilled the beans, but I was still surprised when he did the following. He signaled me over and pointed to my shirt. I looked down and of course he hit me in the nose. Then when you walk away, as soon as you turn your back actually, you feel something stinging your calve. He hit me with his walking stick! He does it to everyone and it's hilarious. The man loves to pull pranks, also to pat you down for security reasons or for cigarettes. I recently grabbed a broom so he slowly extended his cane to increase his reach.

There are a lot of others who like to be silly and have fun with us. Two big men who always come early together just laugh at anything and take any opportunity to crack jokes. Then there's people who prefer for certain volunteers to do their food order. Some children do likewise, one of them a girl who just says to everyone "you crazy". There are a lot of cute babies and children who wave, say hello, blow kisses or just stand there with a smile, but there are definitely some little rascals as well. One boy just keeps saying "one, one, one" and wouldn't stop. Then one day I was doing the tickets and this man at the window says lll. I look up and the resemblance is striking. That's why the boy kept saying it! Not that he needs a reason, none of them do. Just shouting "my friend" – don't try this with one of our founders though – for cups, water, a box, oranges, I want, give me, all night long..It can be annoying, but if you just have fun with it and stay positive, remind yourself they are just kids who are trying to have a normal childhood

then it doesn't really matter.

People in Ritsona try to make the best out of their situation and do it with such an overall positive attitude, that they've made this place into a community that is nothing short of admirable.

by Jelle Wassenaar

---

## Statelessness: what is it and how does the international community address the issue?

Most of us acquire citizenship at birth, and it is something we often take it for granted. Citizenship is something we think about only "when we travel abroad, when the Olympic Games are on, or when we vote in national elections" (2009, Couldrey M. & Herson M. *Stateless*). However, for those who lack recognition as nationals, citizenship is a fundamental issue. Holding a nationality is the key to enjoy basic rights such as health care, education, access to the national judicial system or employment. A stateless person is someone who is not recognised as a national by any State. In a world of nation-states, it is a cruel contradiction that millions of individuals are not recognised as belonging to any of these.

The 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons defines a 'stateless person' as "a person who is not considered a national by any State under the operation of its law" (article 1). The absence of nationality or citizenship makes stateless people vulnerable in any aspect of their life and often subjected to the denial of basic human rights. The lack of official recognition does not mean that stateless people do not have ties to a particular country. However, because of a wide range of possible circumstances, they find themselves in the situation of not being recognised as citizens.

Statelessness is prohibited under international law. Yet, the United Nations

High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there may be as many of 12 million stateless people in the world. In order to give a more precise definition of what makes a person stateless, a first important distinction needs to be made between *de jure* and *de facto* stateless people. "Under the 1954 Convention, individuals who have not received nationality automatically nor through an individual decision under the operation of any state's law, are known as *de jure* stateless persons." (2009, Blitz BK, *Statelessness, protection and equality*) However, there is a large number of people who are unable to prove their nationality or they are denied to access many human rights that other citizens enjoy. These people are considered *de facto* stateless.

International law guarantees stateless persons the enjoyment of human rights. However, they frequently cannot access their rights. For instance, they may find barriers in accessing basic education, health care or other government services, obtaining travel documents, being employed. Stateless persons are also likely to be victims of trafficking or sexual and labour exploitation. Discrimination and inequality are common to any form of statelessness. Still, it is helpful to make a distinction between "*direct discrimination* on the basis of nationality, which is formally recorded in law, and *structural discrimination* that may be indirect but nonetheless denies individuals the opportunity to benefit from citizenship." (2009, Blitz BK, *Statelessness, protection and equality*)

Another useful distinction is between *primary* and *secondary* sources of statelessness. "Primary sources relate to direct discrimination and include: a) the denial and deprivation of citizenship; b) the loss of citizenship. Secondary sources relate to the context in which national policies are designed, interpreted and implemented and include: c) political restructuring and environmental displacement; d) practical barriers that prevent people from accessing their rights." (2009, Blitz BK, *Statelessness, protection and equality*)

## **How do people become stateless?**

The largest populations of non-refugee stateless persons in UNHCR statistics are Myanmar with 810,000 Rohingya (the number only includes the Rohingya in northern Rakhine State), Cote d'Ivoire (700,000), Thailand (506,000) Latvia (312,000), Syria (231,000) and Dominican Republic (210,000).

Statelessness may result from different circumstances. In general, the denial of citizenship is the result of a state action which could be intentional or not. State secession or succession, often but not necessarily following conflicts, may cause statelessness: the dissolution of a State and emergence of new States; the separation of part of a State to form a new one; the transfer of a territory from one State to another.

Other causes of statelessness are the arbitrary denial or deprivation of citizenship on the ground of ethnicity (in law or in practise) or discrimination on ground of gender. In particular, the contribution of gender discrimination to generating statelessness is extensive: 27 countries in the world limit the right of women to pass their nationality to their children (only men can). Children become stateless when they cannot acquire nationality from their father. This can occur, for example, when the father is stateless; when he is unknown or not married to the mother at the time of birth; when he has been unable to fulfil the necessary administrative steps to confer his nationality or when he is unwilling to confer his nationality to his children; etc. Although there are differences between the limits they impose on mothers to confer their nationality to their children, some of the 27 countries whose nationality laws discriminate against female gender are: Brunei Darussalam, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Nepal, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Syria.

Statelessness may also be caused by documentation issues like lack of registration at birth, or the existence of rules for proving nationality which make it difficult for individuals to establish that they possess a nationality. Finally, it can also be the consequence of climate and environmentally induced displacement. In the poorest regions, many minorities

live without any documentation, and this kind of technical problem can cause the lack of citizenship.

The way a country grants citizenship at the moment of birth is a matter of interest and concern for those who operate to prevent statelessness. The most common principles for granting citizenship are the *jus soli* and the *jus sanguinis*. Nationality policies based on the *Jus soli*'s principle confer citizenship to all those born in the territory of a country, while those based on *Jus sanguinis* grant citizenship on children whose parents are citizens of a given country. In practise, nationality policies which prioritise blood over civic criteria make the incorporation of minorities more difficult.

### **Addressing statelessness**

During the 1920s, it was common to make no distinction between stateless and refugee statuses. Lack of protection of Government of their country or origins or any other Government was common to both statuses. Nevertheless, the issue was a matter of concern to nation states and to the League of Nations, which encouraged measures to address the problem. It is, however, only after the massive population displacements following the Second World War that the stateless issue was reintroduced into the international agenda as a separate issue from the refugee problem.

The right to nationality has been elaborated in two United Nations' international conventions: the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. Although the two conventions have not been ratified from a large number of States, both are fundamental international instruments for the prevention and protection of stateless persons. Originally, norms regarding statelessness were to be included in a Protocol to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, however due to the need of dealing with the large amount of post-war refugees, the Convention was adopted without the inclusion of the Protocol. Later, the two fundamental agreements that brought the attention of

the international community to the discourse on statelessness were adopted.

Providing a definition of 'stateless person', the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons gives a fundamental contribution to international law. The Convention requires that States facilitate the assimilation and naturalisation of stateless persons. It also provides minimum standards of treatment. For instance, it defends the right to freedom of movement lawfully on the territory; for some rights such as freedom of association and right to employment, it requires States to guarantee at a minimum the same treatment as other non-nationals; with respect to freedom of religion and education to their children, it provides that stateless persons are to enjoy the same rights as citizens.

The 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness sets rules on States to prevent and eliminate statelessness. By doing that, the Convention gives effect to article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which recognises that "everyone has the right to a nationality". A central focus of the Convention is the prevention of statelessness at birth. "It requires States to grant citizenship to children born on their territory, or to their nationals abroad, who would otherwise be stateless"(2011, Text of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness – Introductory note by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) formally received from the UN General Assembly a specific and global mandate to prevent and reduce statelessness, as well as to protect the rights of stateless people around the world through the adoption of a series of resolutions. The UNHCR activities regarding statelessness can be grouped in four categories: identification, prevention, reduction and protection.

Following the positive steps made by countries and the guidelines provided by the UNHCR, several specific actions need to be taken to address statelessness. First of all, preventive actions to avoid potential instances of mass deprivation of nationality. It is fundamental to reform citizenship laws, as well as to adopt administrative procedures to eliminate

discrimination. UNHCR provides technical advice to implement legal reforms. In 2012 and 2013, the agency worked to address gaps in the national legislation of 56 States, mostly from a gender equality and child protection perspective.

Birth registration is, for instance, a fundamental action that has to be taken both to deal with statelessness and ensure child protection. Georgia and the Russian Federation have implemented pledges regarding civil registration, and birth registration will remain a priority for UNHCR actions.

Protection of stateless children is a matter of particular concern. There are an estimated six million children without a nationality around the world. They are particularly vulnerable to sexual and labour exploitation, abuses and trafficking. Many of them are denied access to basic rights such as education and health care. In spite of the importance of protecting stateless children from the many risks they face, only a few international or national child protection systems include stateless children in their programming.

Identification is also essential, since stateless persons usually lack personal documentation. In this regard, some States have taken positive steps toward pledging to undertake studies and surveys to report the issue. The Philippines is leading the way along with Georgia, Moldova and the UK. These countries implemented stateless determination procedures to improve identification of stateless persons. Other countries have made progress in resolving long-standing situations of statelessness by granting citizenship to stateless population: Côte d'Ivoire, the Kyrgyz Republic, Turkmenistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Russian Federation.

UNHCR is also committed to promote accession to the Statelessness Convention. Although the number of States accessing to the two international instruments is still not very high, an unprecedented wave of accessions has been noticed since 2011. This year marks the 60th anniversary of the 1954 Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons. It is an opportunity to draw attention and increase awareness of the issue of statelessness. Therefore, UNHCR launched a

campaign which aims to eliminate statelessness within the next ten years. Some fundamental positive steps have been taken, but there is still much to be done to eliminate a phenomenon which continues to affect the lives of millions of people.

## Bibliography

Blitz BK (2009) Statelessness, protection and equality. *Forced migration policy briefing 3*.

<http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/publications/policy-briefings/RSCPB3-Statelessness.pdf>

Couldrey M. & Herson M. (Ed.) (2009) "Stateless.", *Forced Migration Review* Issue 32 (April 2009)

Guy S. Goodwin-Gill, *Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons* – United Nations Audiovisual Library of International Law –

[http://legal.un.org/avl/pdf/ha/cssp/cssp\\_e.pdf](http://legal.un.org/avl/pdf/ha/cssp/cssp_e.pdf) (Accessed: 27.05.2014)

Stateless – UNHCR Actions <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c16a.html> (accessed 30.05.2014)

Text of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness – Introductory note by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – January 201

UNHCR (2014) – Background Note on *Gender Equality, Nationality Laws and Statelessness 2014*– <http://www.unhcr.org/4f5886306.html> (Accessed: 27.05.2014)

Under the radar and under protected – The urgent need to address stateless children's rights p. 5 <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/514acd3e2.pdf> (accessed 01.06.2014)

Volker Türk (2014), *The status of statelessness 60 years on* – Forced

Migration Review May 2014 – <http://www.fmreview.org/afghanistan/tuerk>  
(Accessed 28.05.2014)