UN kicks off stateless people campaign, but omits Palestinians

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The UN’s refugee agency launched a campaign Tuesday to eradicate statelessness within a decade, but UNHCR refrained from including Palestinians in the effort, citing the need for a separate “political solution” to their plight.

Ten million people worldwide have no nationality, leaving them in a devastating legal limbo, the UN refugee agency said Tuesday, launching a campaign to eradicate statelessness within a10 years.

“Every 10 minutes a new stateless person is born,” UN refugee chief Antonio Guterres told reporters in Geneva, describing the situation as “absolutely unacceptable” and “an anomaly in the 21st century.”

With its “I Belong” campaign, UNHCR aims to highlight the “devastating life-long consequences of statelessness” and push countries to rectify their laws to ensure no person is denied a nationality.

“Often they are excluded from cradle to grave, being denied a legal identity when they are born, access to education, health care, marriage and job opportunities during their lifetime and even the dignity of an official burial and a death certificate when they die,” the agency said in its report.

The report does not count the case of the Palestinians, since the UN General Assembly had recognized the State of Palestine, Guterres said.

The problem for many of the 4.5 million of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and the millions more living as refugees around the world is that the State of Palestine has yet to approve its nationality laws, he said, insisting that this “very specific situation” required a “political solution”.

“Statelessness makes people feel like their very existence is a crime,” Guterres said.

People can become stateless due to a range of reasons, like discrimination based on ethnicity, religion or gender, or when a nation state falls apart. War and conflict also often make it difficult to register births.

The largest number of stateless people are to be found in Myanmar, which denies citizenship to some one million Rohingya Muslims, according to Guterres.

Myanmar considers the Rohingya illegal migrants from Bangladesh, which in turn considers the ones who cross the border illegal migrants from Myanmar.

In both countries, the group viewed by the UN as one of the world’s most persecuted peoples faces widespread restrictions, including curbs on movement, education and marriage.

When nation states break apart, people are often also left in limbo, with more than 600,000 people for instance still left stateless after the disintegration of the Soviet Union more than 20 years ago.

In situations of war, conflict and turmoil, it also often becomes difficult to register births, especially among refugees, leaving them stateless.

A full 70 percent of babies born to Syrian refugees in neighboring Lebanon and Jordan have for instance not received legal birth certificates, Guterres said.

A number of countries, including Iran and Qatar, also deny women the right to pass their nationality on to their children on an equal basis with men, “a situation that can create chains of statelessness that span generations,” UNHCR warned.