



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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Speech by Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General

National roundtable on the 1954 and 1961 Statelessness Conventions

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It is my great pleasure to join today this **National roundtable on the 1954 and 1961 Statelessness Conventions organized by the Government of Kyrgyzstan and UNHCR** and to have the opportunity to bring the voice of parliaments to these exchanges.

Ending statelessness is a matter at the core of the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and very close to my heart. As the world organization of national parliaments, the IPU has worked for more than 10 years now to contribute to ending statelessness by mobilizing the parliamentary community and supporting parliamentary action towards this global endeavor. We have done so in close partnership with UNHCR, which I would like to thank for its unfailing cooperation.

The right to a nationality is a fundamental human right. Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that *"[e]veryone has the right to a nationality" and that "[n]o one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality"*.

Concretely, and we all know this, this means that every individual, everywhere in the world, has the right to have a legal connection with a State. Every individual has the right to a sense of identity, to the protection of a State and to fundamental civil and political rights.

Now for many of us, having a nationality seems to be a given, an obvious fact of life. A right taken for granted. And to be honest, there is no reason why in today's world anyone should be deprived of or live without a nationality.

But the reality is that millions of men and women, boys and girls today still cannot enjoy the feeling of belonging; millions cannot enjoy the rights that all citizens do; millions cannot live a life that we call "normal". Millions remain invisible.

Statelessness can result from a variety of causes: conflict of laws, transfer of territory, marriage laws, administrative practices, discrimination, and lack of birth registration. Many of the world's stateless persons are also victims of forced displacement. Indeed, people who have been uprooted from their homes are particularly vulnerable to statelessness, especially when territorial borders are redrawn. But when one looks more closely at the causes of statelessness, one common feature stands out – solutions exist, and they are in the hands of States; they are in the hands of governments and parliaments.

This is where I believe Parliaments, and by extension the IPU, have a role to play.

The first element of any response to ending statelessness resides in legislation and legislative reform. Becoming a party to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, which we are discussing today, is a first and fundamental step.

It is not always an easy one though. The question of citizenship is a sensitive one, which is at the very heart of our societies; it is the glue that brings people together around a common history, past, present and future, a common vision of living together and with others. It is that famous sense of belonging that we all refer to and that we all value.

Becoming Party to the 1954 and 1961 Conventions therefore requires political will and commitment. It will require men and women making the case for those that are not heard; it will require convincing and explaining that by addressing and finding solutions to statelessness, a State is strengthened, and not undermined; and at the end of the day, humanity is strengthened.

We know that most of the ratifications to the 1954 and 1961 Conventions have happened in the last 20 years or so. This means that there is more awareness and understanding of the issues at stake, and more political will. By continuing to engage parliament further; by supporting members in understanding, defending and calling on their governments to act, I am convinced that we can achieve even greater progress.

Ratification is the first step. Implementation is of course the next. In many instances, this means addressing discrimination in laws and ensuring that the legal system in place prevents new cases of statelessness. Members of parliament here again have a responsibility to raise this in their countries, review laws and amend them. And we have seen results – women MPs for instance working across party lines and initiating bills to address key inequality issues, defending the rights of those that are often not heard and forgotten.

We also know that laws are only as good as the effort and resources put into them. This requires constant monitoring of the impact of law and budget allocations aimed at supporting enforcement programmes and structures. For members of parliament, it means regularly questioning the government on implementation and scrutinizing and adopting resources for impact. And here again, we have seen MPs questioning their government, asking for accounts and reallocating resources during budgetary debates, to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and the voiceless.

Lastly, for laws to be effective, they must be widely known and understood so that they can be enforced. We know of the challenge raised by the notion of statelessness – how difficult it is to understand, visualize and monitor. Members of parliament, as opinion leaders can and do spread the word – as representatives of the people, they engage with constituents on a regular basis, they listen and explain so that those that have no voice are represented as well.

This is what the IPU believes in and has been working towards over the past years. Through our Committee on International Humanitarian Law, we have worked to sensitize MPs to humanitarian and human rights law and, more recently, to statelessness. Information is crucial; it is the starting point for any action. Resolving statelessness will gain in strength through wider dissemination of the real issues at stake and challenging misconceptions.

For parliaments to act, they also need to have tools and access to best practices. The IPU and UNHCR have collaborated over the years on the production of several handbooks for parliamentarians; our latest being the one on *Good practices in nationality laws for the prevention and reduction of statelessness*. I am therefore very pleased to launch today with UNHCR the Kyrgyz version of this important tool with the hope that it will assist Kyrgyz MPs in taking further action and engaging in reforms.

We have seen laws changed and amended, wrongs turned to rights thanks to the will and engagement of committed men and women.

Kyrgyzstan is known to all of us as the first State to have resolved all known cases of statelessness. This is a strong and important example to follow. It testifies to your commitment and engagement to leave no one behind. I also know of the important pledges made to achieve the #IBelong Campaign to end Statelessness by 2024. Kyrgyzstan has done a tremendous work to identify and resolve statelessness, but to make this achievement sustainable and prevent statelessness from reoccurring in the future, accession to the 1954 and 1961 Statelessness Conventions and alignment of national legislation with international provisions are key.

At the IPU, we stand by your side in your efforts and resolve to put an end to statelessness in Kyrgyzstan. We look forward to providing any support that may be of use and also giving visibility to the achievements you have and will make.

With less than three years remaining in the #IBelong Campaign to End Statelessness by 2024, and less than ten years to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and leave no one behind, the time for action is now.