

Your Excellencies, Distinguished leaders of different Religions and Organisations, Ladies and Gentlemen:

In 2014 the UNHCR launched the #IBelong Campaign to tackle the scourge of statelessness. The campaign has been a noble initiative aimed at raising awareness about the negative impact of statelessness on children and to stop generational perpetuation of statelessness. According to international law, “a stateless person is defined as someone who is not considered a citizen by any State under the operation of its law.” It is a restrictive and deterring condition that denies individuals political, civil, socio and economic rights and consequently their dignity as human beings. Many children become stateless as a result of their parents who are stateless, or discriminatory citizenship laws, abandonment, or difficulties proving their relationship to a state due to lack of documentation, such as birth certificates. Consequently, these children undergo a lifetime experience of suffering discrimination, denied access to among others, health services, education and fulfilment of their ambitions or dreams.

The #IBelong Campaign also sought to influence states to adopt the plans of the United Nations and the UNHCR that endeavour to eliminate statelessness. Initiatives like Action 7 of the UNHCR’s Global Action Plan to End Statelessness calls on States to ensure birth registration to prevent statelessness becomes a norm by 2024. The importance of birth registration cannot be overemphasised because, as [UNICEF](#) explains, is a “permanent and official record of a child’s existence, and provides legal recognition of that child’s identity... It establishes a legal record of where the child was born and who his or her parents are. Birth registration is required for a child to get a birth certificate – his or her first legal proof of identity.” It is a document that will make sure that the child’s rights are upheld and access to essential services like health care, education, etc. is not denied.

Our meeting today takes place in the 10th and final year of the [#IBelong Campaign](#), and ahead of the launch of the Global Alliance to End Statelessness ([Global Alliance](#)) in October 2024 - a new initiative, led by UNHCR, that seeks to accelerate solutions to statelessness through a collective multistakeholder approach, which centres and respects the experience of those with a lived experience of statelessness.

We meet at a time when in Southern Africa, according to a recent statistical report by UNICEF, 14 million children under five are not registered, and 19 million do not have birth certificates. It therefore, means that universal birth registration which relies on states establishing and maintaining functional and inclusive Civil Registration Systems, is not yet a basic and common practise in the SADC Region. We have an urgent task of encouraging our governments to adopt the practice of issuing birth certificates immediately after birth registration a good and standard practice in the Region.

#### [Collaboration at the regional level](#)

Our endeavour to encourage this Regional practice is of course not unique to our region as others have been at it for some time. In our continent of Africa, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have led the way in efforts to end statelessness. After the adoption of the Abidjan Declaration of ECOWAS Member States on the Eradication of

Statelessness in February 2015, ECOWAS Member States adopted the ‘Banjul Plan of Action of the Economic Community of West African States on the Eradication of Statelessness 2017-2024.’ The plan highlights birth registration to prevent statelessness as one of its main objectives.

The International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) equally adopted at Ministerial level a Declaration of ICGLR Member States on the Eradication of Statelessness in October 2017. The Declaration promotes universal birth registration.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the League of Arab States (LAS) and UNHCR jointly convened a regional meeting on ‘Belonging and Legal Identity’ in October 2016. At that meeting experts from LAS Member States, UN Agencies, civil society, and academia developed recommendations to enhance protection of children in the region, inter alia by providing them with documentation and a legal identity, strengthening birth registration, and aligning nationality laws with international standards.

The SADC Heads of State have also signalled a political commitment to address statelessness in the region through the adoption of the SADC Road Map on the Eradication of Statelessness. The recent adoption of the **protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights Concerning the Specific Aspects of the Right to a Nationality and the Eradication of Statelessness in Africa** also represents a major milestone in regional efforts to eradicate statelessness.

These initiatives have been a powerful engine of national action to address statelessness, including through improved birth registration practices in Africa.

The purpose of this meeting, therefore, is to mobilise religious leaders and organizations, and other stakeholders, in the global strategic objective to accelerate efforts towards the eradication of statelessness. The meeting aims to integrate the voices of those with lived experience of statelessness and to explore ways to create a broader platform where they are central to the dialogue and solutions. A shared and collective responsibility amongst not only states but various stakeholders, religious, civil society, and stateless people themselves will in my view, mitigate the challenge of statelessness in our SADC region.

Lastly, I’d like to express my sincere gratitude to you for agreeing to be part of this important meeting where we will try to find practical and strategic means with which we will contribute to the endeavours of eradicating statelessness. I wish you a productive day and meaningful discussions that will help us be part of the solution.

Thank You!

+Buti Tlhagale OMI

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Johannesburg

