



"NO ONE CAN IMAGINE WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE STATELESS. I FLY THROUGH THIS LIFE WITH NOWHERE TO LAND."

Stateless man, 2011

Standing on the beach in Kuwait, a Bidoon man looks out over the Persian Gulf. Twenty years have passed since his Kuwaiti identity was ripped away from him. In southeastern Ivory Coast, a woman is afraid to leave her village. Denied an ID, she experiences humiliating problems at roadside check posts. In the Dominican Republic, a young Dominican man of Haitian descent has been unable to find any regular work. Like so many of his generation born in the country, he was denied the opportunity to continue his education and has been reduced to working odd jobs off the books. On the outskirts of Belgrade, Serbia, a teenage boy watches his younger brothers and sisters play in front of their dilapidated home in a Roma settlement. None of them legally exist. And in western Myanmar, a Rohingya man in his early twenties takes a moment to compose himself, after describing how his brother was killed by a mob of people who eventually destroyed their neighborhood. He has lived his entire life in a country that refuses to acknowledge he belongs there.

According to the United Nations some ten million people worldwide are stateless. As defined by the UN, statelessness is "a condition of a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law." Today, men, women, children, families and entire communities around the world have been deprived of the fundamental right to a nationality and are not recognized as a citizen by any country.



A person can find themselves stateless under a number of circumstances. Conflict, the shifting of borders, the collapse of colonialism and the breakup of states like the Soviet Union and the creation of new ones have resulted in millions of people becoming stateless. Inconsistent and inadequate citizenship laws cause people to find themselves in a legal no man's land. The lack of documentation such as birth certificates, marriage certificates and other forms of identification can contribute to statelessness and can often result in the inheritance of statelessness from one generation to the next. But in most cases, statelessness is rooted in discrimination and intolerance.

The determination between who has access to resources and who doesn't, who can participate and who can't, who belongs and who doesn't, commonly creates a conflict where identity is manipulated. Rather than embracing a shared identity, "Others" are created and the differences exploited between "Us" and "Them." That leads governments and people in power to use citizenship as a weapon to disenfranchise those who they feel threaten their political, ethnic or personal interests. Citizenship, the connection that should link each and every one of us to a state, is synonymous with empowerment, inclusion and belonging. Denial of citizenship is used to do the very opposite: marginalize, exclude and cast aside.



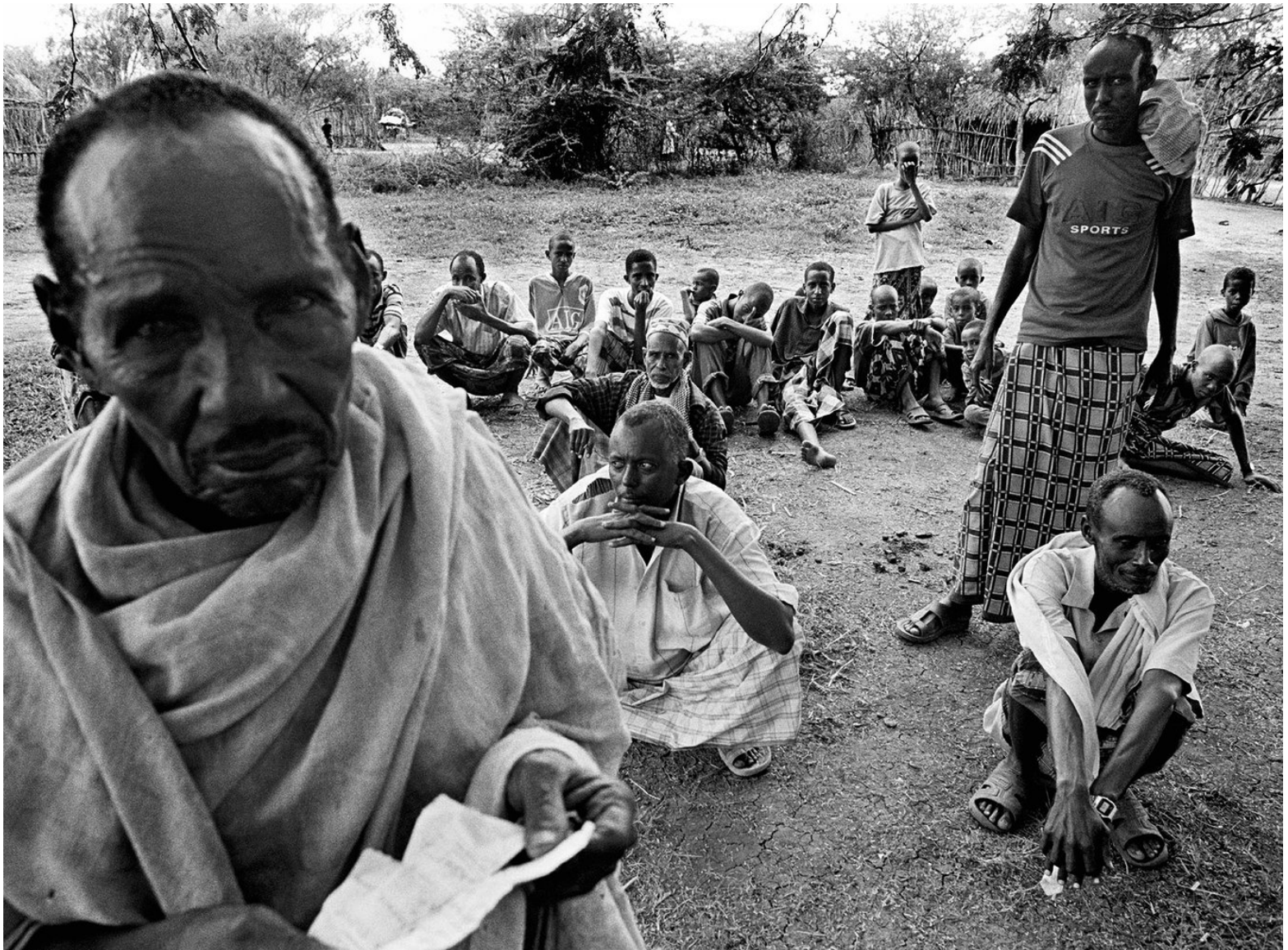
"WE ARE BETWEEN THE EARTH AND THE SKY."

Stateless man in Iraq, 2014

In principle, all people have human rights. In reality, these rights are not accessible to everyone. The world is constructed of nations that are governed by laws, which empower and protect the state and its citizens with rights. Without citizenship, most stateless people find they do not have the protection of laws. As a result, they are frequently refused most social, civil and economic rights and are vulnerable to any number of human rights abuses. Stateless people are often denied legal employment and access to education and affordable healthcare. They are restricted in the freedom to travel and commonly live in fear with the constant threat of arrest and detention. Statelessness creates overwhelming challenges and borders that plague almost every aspect of their life. It is a condition where individuals, paralyzed by powers beyond their control, find they are unable to navigate through life as equal citizens and pushed to live invisible lives on the edge of society. In essence, without citizenship and the connection to their state, a person doesn't legally exist and is denied fundamental rights.

While some stateless people are forced to flee their homes because of conflict or persecution, most stateless people are not refugees. Most have never left the country of their birth. They have a deep connection to the country they call home and where they have lived, often for generations. The tragedy for most stateless people is not that they do not have a home. The tragedy for most is that the country that they call home has rejected them, and the denial of citizenship is the tool that has been used to reject them. Today, entire communities are

denied an identity, and millions of talented, hard working, intelligent stateless people are trapped within the exotic landscape of their own borders, excluded from participating in and contributing personally and culturally to these places they call home.



Statelessness usually doesn't take the form of violence. It commonly takes the form of the passing of a new law, the issuing of a discriminatory policy or procedure, the arbitrary rejection of documentation by the state or by local officials, or the collective deprivation of any number of other legal, social, political, economic and cultural rights. Statelessness is an invisible and radical form of exclusion that often evades the headlines. Yet, for many stateless people, the denial of citizenship rests as the root cause for any number of injustices that are widely talked about: forced migration, human trafficking, child labor, gender discrimination, landlessness and even conflict. This makes stateless people some of the most invisible, neglected and powerless people in the world.

Watching your child walk into a school for the first time. Holding a diploma in your hands after years of studying. The new taste of freedom after receiving your first driver's license. Casting your vote and knowing your voice has been heard. Knowing you have the protection of laws and the security of a passport or an ID to prove who you are. Having the freedom to travel from one place to another, however short or long the distance might be, to find work or visit loved ones. Owning a small plot of land or a house or a business. Getting married. Having a child and receiving a birth certificate with the child's name on it. For most, these moments are of great significance. They are some of the passages of life. Yet they are out of reach for most stateless people.



Without citizenship, stateless people are often denied those state-issued documents that are required to enroll in school or receive a diploma or be issued a driver's license or a passport or ID. They face insurmountable difficulties registering to vote or owning land or having a business license issued to them. They have problems registering their marriage, which is often required to have a birth certificate issued for their child. Most of all, they are not accepted as people who have something to contribute to the larger fabric of society, including their culture, language, religion and historical heritage. They have been denied recognition and the ability to truly feel they belong to a place.

How fragile are an individual's fundamental rights when the caregiver of those rights comes in the form of the absolute power of the state? The lives of stateless people show us how these rights can evaporate with the signature of a new law. What power can discrimination, intolerance and racism have over the human condition? The tragedy of stateless people show us the disastrous impact these emotions and actions can have. To what lengths will people in power go to exclude those who challenge the state's definitions of national identity? Statelessness shows us these extremes.

"I FEEL LIKE NOBODY WHO BELONGS TO NOWHERE."

Veronica, Stateless woman in Ukraine, 2009



In many ways, statelessness is a taboo subject that governments do not want to discuss because in most instances, discriminatory and intolerant policies by governments themselves are the reasons for people becoming stateless in the first place. The 1954 UN Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 UN Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness are the two primary international treaties related to the issue of statelessness. Both conventions have seen an increase in the number of countries becoming a party to them. Yet as stateless people continue to suffer around the world, state sovereignty, political agendas, national interests or the lack of political will remain the primary obstacles to solutions.

The man in Kuwait moves ahead with his life, never losing the strong desire to be recognized again in the country of his birth. The woman in Ivory Coast gathers up the courage to leave her village every so often, knowing the consequences. Being a mother, she does everything she can to provide for her young children. The young man in the Dominican Republic finds those odd jobs and does whatever he can to make a future for himself. The teenager in Serbia understands that the sacrifices he makes will hopefully ensure his brothers and sisters will have a better life when they reach his age. And regardless of the abuse and the intolerance the young Rohingya man has endured, he says Myanmar is and always will be his home.

As the international community comes to recognize the struggles of stateless people and the need to find solutions to their plight, stateless people forge ahead with their lives as some of the most resilient and resourceful people in the world. ***Nowhere People*** captures a moment in time in the lives of stateless people, and tries to reveal the essence of their condition. It not only exposes the hardships stateless people endure, it also highlights the sheer courage and perseverance they have to adapt, overcome adversity and find ways to survive from one generation to the next.

