

Text Speech
YB Datuk Liew Vui Keong
Minister of Law, Prime Minister Department (Law)
On
Forum on Childhood Statelessness and Launch of IPU Handbook, 19 March
2019

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Salam Sayangi Malaysia Ku

It is a great pleasure for me to address all of you here today to commemorate the Malaysian launch of the Inter-Parliamentary Union Handbook No. 29: Good Practices in Nationality Laws for the Prevention and Reduction of Statelessness. The Malaysian government welcomes a forum such as this to provide input in addressing the issue of stateless individuals in the country. The government believes that every individual residing in Malaysia has a role to play by contributing to the prosperity of the country. But for that to happen, every individual's presence needs to be recognized so that they have a sense of belonging and pride to be in a place where they have always called home.

The definition of 'statelessness' is a sad one. Typically, it means there is an absence of nationality, living in a place called home yet not recognized as a citizen of that home. They believe they are Malaysians – they were born here, they look the same as our people, speak the same language, practice the same culture, but law doesn't say that they are genuine citizens of Malaysia without proper documentation to prove it. Such a situation has life-long effects on an individual, their families, and societies. They have no right to education, healthcare or legal employment. They are deprived of the benefits that legally valid citizens enjoy. It can mean a life on the margins of society. The very nature of statelessness means that it is difficult to truly capture how many people are affected.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As signatory of the 2014 Ministerial Declaration to "Get Every One in the Picture" in Asia and the Pacific, Malaysia continues to focus her efforts to improve national Civil Registration and Vital Statistics systems. Identifying who is within our territory is central to public administration and good governance for all. Education and awareness may be lacking on the part of society when it comes to registering births. This may be contributed by economic disposition of the people who only concentrate on daily lives in one area and not going beyond. Perhaps, there is no road access to towns and cities, which hampers the spread of knowledge and vital matters such registering births.

The government has to work hard to reach to these people, who are 'left out' of the current scene. Apart from mobilizing courts to hear and assist rural folks on late registration of birth certificates and identification documents, the government is truly grateful for concerned and caring societies of NGOs that also go down to the ground to find those people who are not aware of their right to citizenship.

Statelessness is not just a human rights issue, it is a developmental issue. Stateless persons have limited participation in the formal economy and as such, less able to contribute, and fully sustain and improve their lives.

For children, the impact of statelessness is even more profound. From a young age, they are limited in their potential to contribute to their own communities. When we were small, we were always told by our parents or elders to live a good life when we're older. For many of us who were privileged to go to school, we were told to study hard and get a good job. This is not something that can be acquired by stateless persons, what more to think of such a dream exist. Given the chance to be included as citizens, stateless children will have the same opportunities as everyone else to learn, play, and be full members of their society. In this regard, the Government is committed to ensure that those who are entitled to Malaysian citizenship are given the opportunities and pathways to assert their claim.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Tirelessly, Malaysia has made great strides in achieving solutions for stateless persons. The Government has recently increased access to public education for stateless and undocumented children, as part of the Education Ministry's "Zero Reject Policy", to ensure that all children in the country, including undocumented children, have access to education.

Additionally, last year, our Prime Minister announced that stateless permanent resident seniors will become Malaysian citizens, subject to fulfilling relevant conditions. This is in line with the Pakatan Harapan Manifesto on a Special Commitment to the Indian Community to resolve stateless issues. Granting citizenship to red identity card holders aged 60 years and above has been seen as a positive step to include the people in society.

In Sabah, the Chief Minister has recently announced that stateless children with one Malaysian parent will be given assistance to obtain proper legal documents. This announcement came after the Chief Minister met a teenager who scored excellently in her secondary school examination, but was denied access to higher education because she did not possess the proper documents to prove that she is Malaysian, despite having one parent who is. It is revelations of the society like this that the government doesn't want to feel that it has missed on an opportunity to groom an outstanding individual who could do herself, her family and her country proud in the future. Therefore, we are committed to assist rural and remote populations to access their rights as citizens.

Despite the efforts made, statelessness is still a major concern in Malaysia. However, it is one that can be resolved through pragmatic improvements in our laws and practices. Parliamentarians have an important and critical role to play to implement reforms in nationality law and procedures.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union Handbook No. 29: Good Practices in Nationality Laws for the Prevention and Reduction of Statelessness is an important publication. It serves as a tool for legislators and advocates when considering solutions to resolve statelessness for the benefit of individuals, communities, and the country as a whole. Therefore, it is my honour to launch this publication today together with UNHCR, the agency mandated to address statelessness in the world. Thank you.

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