Rescuing populations from the threat of statelessness in northern Benin

Karimama, Bénin: Just a few weeks after joining the protection unit for stateless persons of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) regional office, I was given the opportunity to participate in my first field mission and to reach out to people threatened by statelessness in northern Benin, at the border with Niger. The aim of this mission was to understand the causes of the situation faced by these people, analyze its impact on their daily lives, and envisage lasting solutions, together with local authorities.

I had to estimate the number of people threatened by statelessness, check the level of documentation of the persons concerned, and meet officials of the local administration in order to understand the reasons for this situation. I was able to meet individually with residents of Karimama, whose nationality remains unclear, to gather evidence about their daily lives.

This field work was then completed with legal research in order to identify solutions provided by Beninese and international law to resolve this untenable situation for thousands of people in the north of Benin.

In 2005, the International Court of Justice ruled on a border dispute between Benin and Niger over the course of the Niger River. The ruling determined the boundary between these two countries but left unresolved the problem of the nationality of people living in the areas concerned. In fact, nearly 2,000 people found themselves, from one day to the other or next, on Beninese territory with undetermined nationality and facing serious
threats of statelessness.

The lack of nationality is a serious impediment to the enjoyment of fundamental rights. With undetermined nationality, access to certain goods and services becomes more difficult. "Because no country recognizes us, we live as if we were in prison", said one of the people interviewed in Karimama, at the border with Niger. "Our children do not have birth certificates and we cannot enroll them in school" he told me. Every year there are hundreds of children without civil status who see their future jeopardized. The consequences of this situation are severe not only for the children themselves, but also for their community, said one of the people interviewed in Karimama, at the border with Niger.

However, legal solutions exist both in domestic and international law. Based on the research I was able to carry out in this area, recommendations have been made for local and central authorities. Following this mission, the UNHCR office in Benin has started discussing with government in order to provide lasting solutions for all those people living in the north of Benin. UNHCR has therefore given them hope, so much so that they now have a burning desire to obtain a nationality and regain their dignity.

Sub-Saharan Africa

• Benin • UNHCR • nationality

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