



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

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UNHCR welcomes granting of legal identity to young refugees

The UN Refugee Agency has welcomed the PNG Government's issuance of birth certificates to over 1700 refugee children from West Papua Province, Indonesia, as an important step in gaining a legal identity.

In a collaborative effort between the PNG Government, UN agencies, and the Catholic Diocese of Daru-Kiunga, 1736 birth certificates were issued to refugee children born in PNG and living in 17 remote settlements along the border of Indonesia. These children represent a significant portion of the estimated 5,000 refugee population living in the region.

UNHCR's PNG Representative Mr Johann Siffointe said the completion of the complex exercise was the result of months of work across a number of organisations carried out in very challenging circumstances.

"The completion of this exercise in PNG – a country where only 3 percent of the general population have their births registered – was an important achievement and shows what can be done by working collaboratively," Mr Siffointe said.

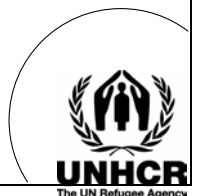
"It demonstrates further the PNG Government's commitment to meeting its international obligations and in particular the Refugee Convention and the Convention on the Rights of the Child," Mr Siffointe said.

The exercise is part of a broader campaign by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Civil Registry Office of the Department of Community Development launched in March 2004 to achieve 100% of all births in PNG registered by December 2007.

The right to a name and identity is one of a child's most fundamental rights. UNICEF PNG's Child Protection Officer Bruce Grant said: "A significant highlight of the birth registration campaign was the registering of births of children living in settlements along the PNG/Indonesia border. Children who have been displaced because of conflict or other reasons are among the most vulnerable of all children."

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The campaign also aims to put in place an accessible, decentralised and sustainable birth registration system and promote greater awareness of the importance of registration amongst parents and communities.

Deputy Civil Registrar Augustus Wagambio said: "this exercise is very important for the Office of Civil Registry. Registration is a tool for development. The majority of people in PNG are not registered so it will provide us with a more accurate population count. PNG became a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1994. This exercise also gives rights to refugee children as long as they are born in PNG."

The complex registration exercise involved the Department of Community Development through the Office of Civil Registry, UNHCR, UNICEF, the Catholic Diocese of Daru-Kiunga and the Western Province Administration, and the Mercy Refugee Service.

Sister Maureen Sexton of the Mercy Refugee Service and Kiunga Diocese received training from the Office of Civil Registry in collecting and recording data about children living in the border region. She and her Diocese colleagues travelled to the remote settlements in the North Fly Region of Western Province (often as much as a full day's travel by foot and dinghy) to gather the information.

"It was really a logistical challenge to access the 17 settlements. Most are in remote areas and there is little infrastructure. It took about 7 months to complete the exercise," Sister Maureen said.

"We worked through the leaders of each community. We also worked with the local communities in the border area which has contributed to improved relationships between the local communities and the refugees. Both sides now recognise the importance of having birth certificates," she said.

UNHCR's Siffointe said the registration of births is the first legal acknowledgement of a child's existence and therefore a crucial first step in realising important rights and needs -- from enrolling in school at the right age to opening a bank account, finding a job or obtaining credit. There are also important child protection issues (from preventing child labour or forced marriage for girls to preventing under-age military service or conscription), for which being able to provide a child's age is important.

Another 1,217 refugee children born in PNG and living in the Government sanctioned refugee settlement of East Awin, Western Province, received birth certificates in April 2004 under a registration campaign launched by the PNG authorities and UNHCR.

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