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# 2019 Winner of UNHCR's Nansen Refugee Award

## BIOGRAPHY

## Azizbek Ashurov

Azizbek Ashurov, a human rights lawyer and the Executive Director of the NGO Ferghana Valley Lawyers Without Borders (FVLWB) in the Kyrgyz Republic is the 2019 winner of UNHCR's Nansen Refugee Award.



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Ashurov specialises in nationality law. He has spent the last 15 years helping people obtain Kyrgyz citizenship in and around the Ferghana Valley region of Kyrgyzstan and is widely credited with helping the country become the first in the world to end statelessness in 2019.

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Under Soviet control, with no internal borders existing, people moved across Central Asia, acquiring residency and getting married. After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the formation of new states, many people became stranded across newly established borders, often with invalid Soviet passports or no means to prove where they were born. This left hundreds of thousands of people stateless throughout the region, including in Kyrgyzstan.

Motivated by his own family's difficult experience acquiring citizenship after arriving from Uzbekistan in the aftermath of the dissolution, Ashurov helped to found FVLWB in 2003 to offer free legal advice and assistance to vulnerable groups of displaced, stateless and undocumented people in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan.

**“Our main method was to work with the government. We are little warriors but behind us was a big tank.”**

Kyrgyzstan's corner of the Ferghana Valley – a densely populated region of Central Asia that shares borders with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – was heavily affected by statelessness.

As more and more people approached FVLWB for help with citizenship issues, he turned the organisation's focus to statelessness, working with others to map cases across the country for the first time, and setting out to tackle the devastating problem once and for all.

Ashurov and his team helped establish mobile (or roving) units that sought out stateless individuals, travelling to remote areas of the country to find vulnerable and socially marginalized groups. In their mountainous country, the mobile legal teams relied on a battered four-wheel drive and where the truck could not go – rugged hillsides or steep valleys – they travelled on horseback.

He also made close connections with the 4,600 strong Lyuli community, a tight-knit nomadic group found across Central Asia and often forced to live on the fringes of society as a result of their lack of documentation.

At the same time Ashurov worked to achieve landmark legal precedents for the entire country. His close work with the Kyrgyz authorities, including the launch of a temporary



'amnesty' for those without crucial papers, facilitated the naturalization of large numbers of stateless people. His innovative approaches to tackling statelessness are now promoted by UNHCR as best practice across Central Asia.

Ashurov's work isn't over yet. He and his organization are now advocating to ensure that every child is registered at birth and that adequate legal safeguards against statelessness are put in place. In 2015, he also had a leading role, with UNHCR and other NGOs, in establishing the Central Asian Network on Statelessness (CANS), to bring together civil society and academic institutions working on statelessness from throughout the region.

Similarly to Kyrgyzstan, a number of states in the wider region have initiated campaigns through which some 46,000 stateless people have so far been identified and over 34,500 cases have been successfully resolved to date.



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## Case study

For her whole life, Nazgul, 22, dreamed of being legally employed. But without a birth certificate, she and her baby daughter fell into poverty and despair.

Now, thanks to tireless efforts to eradicate statelessness by the Government of Kyrgyzstan, Nazgul has finally received her documents and quickly found a job, waitressing at a café near her home. At last, she can build a better future for her daughter.

"I like this job very much," she says, happily, tightening the strings of her apron. "I like to communicate and meet new people. I also enjoy spending time with colleagues."

"Documents are very important. They help with basic things like sending my children to kindergarten and getting an education. Now I have all the rights of a citizen and so does my daughter. I would really like her to succeed in her life more than I did."

**"Before I had my documents I never worked. Now I have the rights of a citizen and I am very happy that my daughter has them too. I like this job very much."**



UNITED NATIONS / Department of Field Support Cartographic section / Map No. 3770 Rev. 8 / June 2011

## Statelessness in the Kyrgyz Republic and Central Asia

Under Soviet control, with no borders existing, people moved easily across Central Asia, acquiring residency, getting married and settling freely. After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the formation of new states, many people became stranded across newly established borders, often with now invalid Soviet passports or no means to prove where they were born. This left hundreds of thousands of people stateless throughout the region, including in Kyrgyzstan.

Women were disproportionately affected, often left without citizenship after marrying and settling outside of their own state before the dissolution. As a result of hereditary citizenship laws, their statelessness was passed onto their children.

Kyrgyzstan became the first country in the region – and the world – to end

statelessness in 2019. In the wider Central Asia region, the latest figures (mid-2019) report more than 98,000 remaining stateless cases in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. However, the true number of stateless people is believed to be higher – an ongoing effort is raising awareness among people in remote communities to encourage them to come forward to be identified.

Migration in and out of the region coupled with the lack of effective safeguards in citizenship laws continue to lead to additional cases of statelessness being identified. The next main challenge for eradication of statelessness in Central Asia is for States in the region to accede to the Statelessness Conventions and to implement their provisions in national legislation, including through statelessness prevention safeguards.



## The #IBelong Campaign and the 2019 High Level Segment on Statelessness

In November 2014, UNHCR launched a Global Action Plan to End Statelessness: 2014 – 2024, developed in consultation with States, civil society and international organisations. The plan sets out a guiding framework made up of 10 Actions that need to be taken by States and the international community as a whole to end statelessness within the decade.

As 2019 marks the mid-point of the 10 year Campaign, called the #IBelong Campaign to End Statelessness, UNHCR will convene a High Level Segment on Statelessness on 7 October, 2019 in the context of UNHCR's Executive Committee meeting in Geneva. The event aims to assess achievements to date, showcase good practices, and encourage concrete pledges by States and others (regional organizations, international organizations, the private sector, civil society, etc.) to take action to address statelessness in the remaining five years of the Campaign.

[www.unhcr.org/nansen](http://www.unhcr.org/nansen)