

## 2016 UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs

Opening plenary – Wednesday 15 June 2016

*Statement by Zhirair Chichian (Stateless Youth from Georgia)*

Greetings to all!

It is a great pleasure to be here today with you. It is simply unforgettable for me. To be honest it is not easy to tell my story to strangers. Perhaps, among you, there are those who will listen to the story of my life and feel happiness or regret. I hope that the story of my life which you are about to hear, will change a lot in your life and the lives of your children, and that you will have an idea of how difficult it is to be a stateless person. By origin, I am Armenian. I was born in Georgia in 1993 in a difficult period following the collapse of the Soviet Union. There were no workplaces and my father went to Russia for a job. It was very difficult for our family during this time because money is not the most important thing for our family, family relations and being close to each other are the most important. That's why we moved to Russia, for my family to be together. I was five years old at the time. Unfortunately my parents were not able to solve the problems with the government concerning my documents, because everyone was demanding bribes and they deceived us, so that's how I left as a stateless person.

I grew up like this, my father's acquaintances helped me to get into school at their own risk. I remember, in junior classes I had a fever and when the doctor examined me she said that it was tonsils and that I needed an operation. For surgery I needed an insurance policy. But when the school gave insurance policies to other pupils, I didn't get one because I was as a stateless person. So we had to borrow money to do the surgery and after that I had more and more similar unpleasant memories. I always liked to play sports – Greco-Roman wrestling. I was a very good athlete and participated in many competitions, and won most of the time. But I could not join the members of my team in competitions abroad, because I did not have citizenship. I am a stateless person and I have never had official documents. It hurts me that I was always left behind, even though I was as good of an athlete as them. When they went for wrestling competitions, I was smiling and always happy for them. I was never jealous, and I carried my smile for them. But I never showed my pain which was eating me from the inside. When they participated in different competitions, I felt like a handicapped person strapped to my bed.

I had a lot of opportunities to go to Europe together with my team, and we were waiting, hoping, preparing, and working hard for this moment. One day, our coach called us together and said "tomorrow bring your passports, we are going to Europe for wrestling competitions, we need to get visas, etc." Then he turned to me and said: "how did you

solve your problems about the citizenship?” the smile on my face disappeared and I was speechless and could not express my feelings. “What do I do with you now, my son? I would love to take you with us, but you do not have a passport.” At that moment I felt like a swallow which grew up in a nest with others and soon all will fly out of the nest but he can’t fly because he has a broken wing. Nonetheless, I did not give up and I carried on with strong faith inside of me, I continued to wrestle. I was sure that God would appreciate all of my hard work and open the sunlit way for me so that I could have citizenship. After that I would always be a winner and I would not be different from others. I would have the opportunity to learn, to continue playing sports, and to be a winner.

Two years ago, I learned that my grandfather was very sick and I came back to Georgia to take care of him. After he passed away, I remained with my grandmother. Then I started the application process here in Georgia for documentation. The problem was that they were asking for some documents which were in Russia and that we could not provide. The Ministry of Justice of Georgia started to work on my documentation and luckily over the summer UNHCR invited me to a meeting with stateless youth. In the beginning I was very nervous as it was the first time I met with young people with the same problems as me. It was very important to share experiences with them to realize that I was not the only stateless person. It was exciting when we got to know each other in the beginning. Soon this meeting became one of the most enjoyable meetings of my life. When the guests from Geneva spoke English, I did not understand their language but I could understand by their faces and their smiles that they took our problems very close to their hearts. For me, the meeting was an opportunity to meet with other youth in the same position as me, and to tell my story. After this meeting, UNHCR did a report on stateless children and youth and by the way, my story and picture is inside.

UNHCR invited me to make a speech on behalf of young stateless persons at the United Nations (UN) meeting in New York. It was the first year anniversary of the “*I Belong*” campaign, which was attended by high-ranking officials from different parts of the world. When Nino notified me about this, at first I thought that she made a mistake with numbers and was intending to call someone else instead.

I could not believe that I, Zhirair, an ordinary stateless person, who had never had the opportunity to travel, will go to New York and would be advocating for the “*I Belong*” campaign. I thought it was impossible, but soon I found out that everything is possible with UNHCR! I was very worried until I got visa. I was praying and trying to avoid negative feelings, and when Nino confirmed that I finally got a visa I cried out loud from happiness, I was smiling to everyone even to strangers in the streets, and still could not believe it. When we arrived at the airport and reached the passport control desk, they first checked Nino’s documents. I was not worried for her, but when it came to me, I thought that they would reject my entry into the airplane and that I would be obliged

to go back home to my village. But, then they let me into an airplane for the first time in my life!

I find it hard to find the right words which would describe my feelings upon becoming a traveller for the first time in my life, upon becoming a part of another world where I met with people of different nationalities and was flattered to speak in front of members of honourable societies. That is why I want to address young stateless persons. Never give up, never lose hope, fight, continue to be engaged in your favourite activities, and do not pay attention to anything else, because your efforts will be appreciated one day. I do not believe that I spent my time with a status of a stateless person in vain.

Yes, I do not have the possibility to be professionally engaged in Greco-Roman wrestling, but I still practice every day in my orchard in my village. I hung a rope on the tree and I practice with it, and in case anyone is doubting my professional skills, I can demonstrate to them during the break and even challenge someone to a fight... Of course I am joking now, but I am positive that after acquiring citizenship I will get engaged in my favourite sport as a professional and actively participate in competitions and train children.

I also want to address to those who are capable of fighting for something without having a citizen's status and are able to change the lives of millions of people all over the world. Do not give up, do not forget about us, we have equal rights as you to say "I belong". We, the stateless people have rights to education, work, medical assistance, family, travel, victories and a life with dignity. Victory with a status of a stateless person is possible, and I am a living example of it.

I, Zhirair Chichian, a stateless person, from a small village in Georgia am standing in front of you at the international conference in Geneva, advocating for the UNHCR campaign "I belong", so let us win together against statelessness, which has ruined our nerves and which we eventually got bored of. With regards to UNHCR, I cannot express the right words to thank this organization, but I promise that I will fight with you hand in hand, so that every citizen can proudly say that they belong!