

Stateless kids left in limbo

OVER the past few months, there have been news reports in local newspapers about the government's plan to review the standard operating procedure (SOP) on approving citizenship applications for persons born and bred in Malaysia but denied their right to citizenship.

These include a Bernama report published in some newspapers in April 2019 that quoted Home Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin saying that the government would review the existing SOP on granting citizenship to expedite the process so that those concerned would not have to wait too long, and "Call for SOP for approval of citizenship" (*The Star*, April 3, 2019; online at <https://bit.ly/2uRIM2F>).

Parents like myself who adopted stateless children have been waiting with bated breath for news on the progress of the SOP review.

We had heard about it during a gathering at Putrajaya in August last year that was attended by parents who had adopted stateless children, and members of the Stateless Family Support Group (SFSG). Some of the attendees came from Johor and Penang.

At the gathering, we heard and

shared our heart-breaking experiences in trying to obtain the necessary documentation to declare the stateless among us as citizens of this country. Among them were individuals who were already 18 who wanted to continue their studies to tertiary level but were unable to do so because of their status.

I sat next to a 19-year-old girl who clutched her exam results in her hands. Her father sat behind her, looking worried.

Everyone in the room had their own story to tell of how they had been given a chance in life by people (adoptive parents), only to face limited options later due to being stateless. They couldn't open bank accounts, secure formal employment, get married legally or go for further studies in higher education institutions in the country.

There were gifted youngsters, state swimmers and athletes who could not represent the country or travel overseas for competitions.

A member of Parliament who attended the gathering said there have been reports of suicides and attempted suicides by young people labelled as stateless. In short,

the long wait, delays and rejections have dire consequences on both the stateless individuals and their families.

Please let us know about the progress of the SOP review. When this is finally completed, would it be passed down to the National Registration Department (NRD)?

According to some members of the SFSG whose applications have been rejected a few times, most of the officers at the NRD do not even know about the SOP review despite the fact that it was announced by the Home Minister himself in April last year.

We also suggest that a meeting of the relevant authorities, the Education and Home ministries and possibly the Welfare Department be held to explore avenues for granting stateless children a special document of consideration to allow them to pursue their studies in any local college or university while they await their official documentation.

I have been working at the Education Ministry for 19 years where I dealt with welfare homes. From there, I have seen a few success stories of determined young

people pursuing courses that enabled them to get good jobs, which helped to break the poverty cycle in their family and got their younger siblings out of care homes. They are now inspirational role models to others.

Allow these children to explore their abilities, skills and knowledge so that they can contribute to society. Otherwise, they might be forced to resort to unfavourable means and even crime to survive.

These young people can become role models to those who take their citizenship for granted, for example those who are not taking their education seriously.

The Pakatan Harapan government has given some leeway to those who are stateless, for example children are now allowed to go to school. We are grateful for these things, but we are also hoping that clear guidelines and consistent action on granting citizenship would finally be approved and the information communicated to all the relevant parties as soon as possible.

HOPEFUL
Subang Jaya