

Tassie families hit hard by new Ethiopia ruling

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TASMANIAN families are among 150 who have been left in limbo after the federal Attorney-General put a freeze on adoptions from Ethiopia last month.

Little has been revealed as to the reason for the suspension.

Families and agents have simply been told there are "concerns" that inter-country adoptions are not consistent with obligations under the Hague Convention and its guidelines on the protection of children, and that a review of the program was under way.

Australia has a bilateral agreement with Ethiopia because it is not a signatory of the Hague Convention.

However, information on the department's website goes on to say there are no allegations of child trafficking, nor illegal practices in relation to any adoptions from the Ethiopia-Australia program.

An Attorney-General's Department spokeswoman said a review was under way because the Ethiopian Government required that adoption programs provided community development assistance.

"The Australian program has previously been exempt from the requirement to provide financial/ material assistance because of its unique government-to-government arrangement," she said.

"It appears, in practice, the decision to refer children in need of adoption is made by orphanage directors who are influenced by the existence of assistance projects provided by adoption agencies."

It was not made clear why these concerns constituted the need for a suspension, effective immediately from November 18.

Australian African Children's Aid and Support Association national president Gaylene Cooper said it was not unusual for aspects of the program to be scrutinised, but the full suspension came "out of the blue".

"We understand that they need to investigate any concerns that they have, and we want a good, open, honest program. But to place a suspension on a program that's been working well for 15 years with no consultation is unusual," she said.

Mrs Cooper has secured an appointment with Attorney-General Robert McClelland on Wednesday at which time she hopes to have the suspension clarified.

There are suggestions that the freeze is a knee-jerk reaction to the adoption horror story presented by reporter Mary Ann Jolley in a Foreign Correspondent broadcast in September.

The segment painted a grim picture of the adoption situation in Ethiopia where US adoption agencies are motivated by money, and corruption and crime are part of the system.

"In Ethiopia today it seems it's not about what's best for the child, but rather meeting the demand of foreigners wanting a child," Ms Jolley reported. Australia's adoption process, however, is vastly different.

In 2008, Americans adopted 1724 children from Ethiopia. Australian families adopted just 35 Ethiopian children that year, through its single agency there.

Mrs Cooper said the last month had been frustrating.

Four Tasmanian families have files in Ethiopia awaiting allocation and another 10 files are waiting to be sent. Some of these families have waited more than five years for a child. "There's a lot of families affected by this decision," Mrs Cooper said. The association and other concerned parties have until tomorrow to make a submission to the department to be considered as part of the review, which is expected to be finalised by the end of this year and a decision made early next year.

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Mark and Bev Barratt, of Trevallyn, with their adopted Ethiopian children Pawlos and Medhanit. Picture: PHILLIP BIGGS

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