1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a February 21 meeting in Awassa, the capital city of the Ethiopian province known as the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region (SNNPR), Ambassador Booth told the Regional President, Shiferaw Shigute, and the director of the regional bureau of the Ministry of Women’s, Children’s and Youth Affairs (BoWCYA), Marshet Woldeyohannes Anjub, that half the children involved in international adoption from Ethiopia to the United States come from SNNPR. The USG is concerned for the well-being of orphans and vulnerable children and believes that placing orphans with living family members or adoptive Ethiopian families is generally preferable, but in the event local placement is not possible, inter-country adoption (ICA) should be conducted with integrity. President Shiferaw and Director Marshet stressed the importance of ensuring the legality and transparency of adoptions within the region, and provided an update on the regional government’s efforts to reunify and reintegrate 305 children who were removed from 23 orphanages that were closed last year. END SUMMARY.
2. (SBU) President Shiferaw, the Regional President of SNNPR, discussed the GOE’s efforts to ensure the legality and transparency of adoptions from the region. The number of adoption agencies operating in SNNPR has “mushroomed,” according to the president, and the regional government has taken steps to identify which agencies are engaging in corrupt practices. Director Marshet of BoWCYA provided an update on the status of 305 children who were removed from the 23 orphanages in the region that were closed in June 2011 because of concerns about the practices of these institutions. Of those children, 58 have been reunited with their families, 31 have been permanently placed in child care centers, 32 have been placed in foster care, the families of 51 are still “untraced,” and 7 children had been “reintegrated” and provided with a legal guardian. The children under guardianship are above the age of 12 and are not placed in foster homes. They receive a monthly allowance of 300 Ethiopian Birr (approximately $17.65) and may soon receive training to provide them with income-generating skills. They care for themselves – some live with extended family members in the houses in which they grew – while their guardians play a role in major life decisions.

3. (SBU) Director Marshet stated that it is a goal of BoWCYA to reduce the number of inter-country adoptions of children from SNNPR. The bureau hopes to improve its messaging to Ethiopians about the possibility of domestic adoption and foster care, and has developed ICA guidelines for local Women’s and Children’s Affairs offices around the region. Furthermore, BoWCYA conducts a “case study” on each child referred for inter-country adoption to ensure that only children who are legitimately orphans are being adopted. However, when Ambassador Booth asked about the adequacy of the case studies in preventing illegal or unethical adoptions, Director Marshet admitted that they consist entirely of reviews of the documents submitted with an adopted child’s case file and that in-person investigations are rarely conducted. Ambassador Booth pressed both President Shiferaw and Director Marshet to closely monitor the adoption agencies to ensure they are acting ethically and complying with Ethiopian law.

4. (SBU) Ambassador Booth described a proposed new procedure being developed by the Department of State and USCIS, in coordination with the Ministry of Women’s, Children’s and Youth Affairs (MoWCYA), the Ethiopian federal court, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The proposed Pre-Adoption Immigration Review (PAIR) procedure would allow consular officers at Post to complete a child’s orphan status investigation before his or her case is reviewed by MoWCYA and the Ethiopian court. It is expected that the Pre-Adoption Immigration Review (PAIR) process will significantly reduce the likelihood that an adopted child might be refused a U.S. visa by a consular officer who cannot confirm the child’s orphan status, a situation which would leave the child in limbo. Moreover, PAIR is expected to reduce the number of unethical or corrupt adoptions by increasing the transparency of adoption cases, as well as allowing USCIS more flexibility in denying cases that do not have an approved adoption decree. President Shiferaw responded positively to the PAIR proposal and reaffirmed his government’s commitment to ensuring ethical adoptions within SNNPR.