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SUBJECT: ADOPTIONS IN ETHIOPIA - IT'S ALL ABOUT PRE-SCREENING

1. (SBU) Summary. Embassy Addis hosted a regional adoption conference from September 26-30, 2011 (see Septel). Secretary Clinton's Special Advisor for Children's Issues, Ambassador Susan Jacobs, and Joanna Ruppel, Chief of International Operations at the Department of Homeland Security's Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS), attended the conference and held several bi-lateral meetings with Government of Ethiopia (GOE) officials, focusing on inter-country adoption processing and the USG's desire that adoptions be ethical, transparent and in the best interest of the child and the prospective adoptive parents (PAPs). Everyone we met with shared this common goal. In addition, the Minister of Women, Children and Youth Affairs (MoWCYA) said she would like to see an orphan pre-screening process implemented. The Director General of the Charities and Societies Agency (CSA) outlined the challenges his agency is facing due to a mandatory review of all charities and other non-profit agencies CSA is currently undertaking. The President of the Federal First Instance Court (FFIC) indicated that the FFIC is awaiting recommendations from a study it commissioned to develop better screening and guidelines for processing adoptions. The clear message we received is that the GOE is very receptive to an orphan pre-screening process. The assessment we took away is that GOE will need assistance to implement a system and that we need to closely monitor adoption processing in Ethiopia. Embassy Addis intends to engage fully on both these fronts. End Summary.

MoWCYA - We Want a Pre-Screening Process

2. (SBU) Ambassador Susan Jacobs and Joanna Ruppel met the Minister of MoWCYA, Ms. Zenebu Tadesse, on September 26, 2011. 1.4(D)
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She described the processing of adoption cases and how her agency had slowed down the number of cases (about 5-10 per day) in March of 2011 to better

assess the process. When pressed for the number of cases they are currently processing, an assistant indicated that it was about 25 cases per day. This tracks with what UNICEF (who is more closely engaged on this issue) is telling us, that MoWCYA's lull in case processing was only temporary and they started increasing the number of cases they are processing to previous levels. When a discussion of birth parent interviews began [redacted]

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[redacted] Ambassador Jacobs explained that our intention was [redacted] to ensure that the adopted children were in fact orphans and that the adoption was in the best interest of the child. Ambassador Jacobs noted that because we come into the process at the very end, after the FFIC has issued its adoption decree and MoWCYA has issued its letter certifying the adoption, there was no way of avoiding that. We suggested a pre-screening process as a way to avoid this and offered to work with them to develop it. The Minister [redacted]

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[redacted] openly (and cordially) asked for such a system. We concurred that this would be a viable solution and agreed to form a working group with the Ministry to develop such a system. The Minister also raised it again with the Charge, who met the Minister at a separate event the same evening.

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3. (SBU) There was also a discussion of orphans from SNNPR (Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region) that had been formally adopted but moved from their orphanages after the orphanages had closed. We inquired about five specific cases (the subject of a recent diplomatic note) and wondered if the Ministry had any information to offer on these cases. The Minister said that there were 14 cases in total (Note: Embassy Addis was aware that there 14 cases but only inquired about five specific cases because we only received specific biographical details on five cases for the diplomatic note. End Note), but she had no specific information on the cases. She said that the federal MoWCYA office was working with the regional MoWCYA offices to resolve these cases. [redacted]

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[redacted]

CSA - Reviewing All Adoption Agencies

4. (SBU) On the same day, Ambassador Jacobs met the Director

General of the CSA, Mr. Ali Siraje Mohammed. Mr. Ali was very cordial and gave us a very detailed explanation of his responsibilities and the issues his agency is facing. He noted that his agency was required some two years ago to recertify all charitable agencies operating in Ethiopia. They have not yet completed this mammoth task, but he offered some statistics. He said there are 1655 registered child care centers in Ethiopia, of which 288 are foreign. He said there are 62 adoption service providers, of which 22 are U.S. The review his agency is undertaking thus far has given a poor assessment of 78 child care

institutions. He said that many of the adoption service providers are "not guided by principle" and his office is "taking some measures" to take their licenses. He did not elaborate on the measures being taken, but did note that closing a facility was the last and least preferred option. He noted that CSA is not registering any new agencies at this time.

5. (SBU) Mr. Ali stated that one agency had been unaccredited. We note this because it is Embassy Addis' understanding that two organizations, [redacted] adoption agency, and [redacted] were being investigated for unethical recruitment practices. However, we believe Mr. Ali was referring to [redacted] an adoption agency that had its licensed revoked in December 2010.

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FFIC - Awaiting New Guidelines

6. (SBU) Ambassador Jacob's final meeting of the day was with the President of the Federal First Instance Court, Mr. Desalegn Berhe. Mr. Berhe was anxious to share the difficulties his court encounters dealing with adoption cases. He noted that he had one judge to hear the nearly 4000 adoption cases his court will hear this year. He stated that the FFIC has not seen a slowdown in caseload, despite the reduction in cases purported by MoWCYA. [redacted]

[redacted]

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7. (SBU) Mr. Berhe also highlighted that his court is awaiting a report currently being drafted under a grant from UNICEF. The report will offer new guidelines and procedures that will provide, hopefully, standardized operating criteria under which adoptions will be processed. We reiterated our desire to be part of the review process when the draft of the guidelines and procedures are completed and offered assistance in reviewing and implementing them. Mr. Berhe welcomed our participation in the process and promised to include us as part of the working group.

Comment - It's All About Pre-Screening

8. (SBU) The message we took away from these bilateral meetings is that the GOE welcomes (and actually needs) an pre-adoption orphan determination process. We completely understand and share the frustration of having to investigate a completed adoption. If we can address issues and concerns prior to the I-600 process, we can pinpoint areas that need to be addressed with MoWCYA and FFIC prior to adoptions being finalized and avoid the serious issues PAPs can face when a problem is revealed after an adoption is completed. Embassy Addis, in coordination with the Office of Children's Issues, will await guidance on a proposed pre-screening process, but in the interim will begin laying the foundation with MoWCYA and FFIC to implement such a system. USCIS is committed to working with the State Department and Post to develop a proposal for implementing a pre-adoption process. If the GOE requires such a process, USCIS may make it mandatory. If the GOE does not

require it, USCIS may make it voluntary and will work with the Department of State to create incentives and explain to PAPs why it is in their best interest to follow such a process.

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