

ACTION OCS-00

RELEASED IN FULL

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

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E.O. 12958: N/A
 TAGS: CVIS, CASC, ET
 SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA DECIDES NOT TO SUSPEND INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTIONS.
 FOR NOW

REF: Addis Ababa 1764

1. (SBU) In an inter-ministerial meeting July 9 the Government of Ethiopia approved a plan to study weaknesses in its implementation of laws designed to control the intercountry adoption process and to recommend reforms to strengthen the Government's ability to ensure the protection of children. The group discussed but did not approve a proposal that would have suspended intercountry adoptions until improved safeguards were in place (Reftel). Convened by Ethiopian Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin to discuss problems with intercountry adoptions, the meeting brought together the four ministries that share responsibility for intercountry adoptions - Women's Issues, Justice, Social Affairs, and Foreign Affairs.

2. (SBU) MFA's Assistant Director for International Law and Consular Affairs Minelik Alemu briefed Conoff at a lunch July 10 that also included Tom DiFilipo, CEO of the Joint Council on International Children's Services (JCICS). According to Alemu, the ministers agreed to a plan that includes establishing three committees of experts that will focus respectively on reviewing and evaluating existing adoption agencies, evaluating care facilities (orphanages), and assessing the need for legislative change. Alemu said these committees would be appointed this week and would begin their work July 14. The ministers agreed to meet again in one month to assess the committees' progress.

3. (SBU) The ministers also approved a realignment of the mandate for adoption agencies, according to Alemu. He said agencies would be responsible for providing a full range of services for at risk children, not just intercountry adoptions. Agencies interested only in intercountry adoptions would lose their licenses. Alemu said the proposal to suspend intercountry adoptions until stronger safeguards are in place, which the Foreign Minister had described to Ambassador

REVIEW AUTHORITY: Robert Strand, Senior Reviewer

and conoff in an earlier meeting (Reftel), was discussed at the meeting but was not approved. Alemu said he assumed there would be no suspension unless the components of the plan approved were unsuccessful.

4. (SBU) Alemu suggested that the closer enforcement and monitoring envisioned for the intercountry adoptions process would mean cases will take longer to complete and this in turn will lead to a drop in the total numbers of adoptions approved per year. He also suggested the Government's efforts to more closely monitor agencies will likely reduce the total number of adoption agencies. There are currently 70 agencies licensed to coordinate intercountry adoptions in Ethiopia. Twenty-four of these are American agencies. Finally, noting that the Ethiopian penal code lacks laws specifically aimed at adoption fraud and child selling, Alemu said the Government would explore the need for legislation to criminalize such practices.

5. (SBU) Both conoff and DiFilipo expressed support for the Government's efforts to strengthen the integrity of the intercountry adoption process and appreciation for a plan that appears sensibly focused, timely, and which takes into account the best interests of children. DiFilipo was in Addis for a series of meetings with the ministries of Women's Affairs, Justice, and MFA in which he submitted the JCICS' proposed Standards of Practice, which he asked the Government to consider adopting. DiFilipo reported Ethiopian officials were generally receptive to his organization's proposal and expressed interest in partnering with the JCICS to explore ways to improve the intercountry adoption process. The JCICS has worked closely with other foreign governments on similar projects in the past.

6. (SBU) In addition to proposing JCICS' Standards of Practice, DiFilipo also discussed with Ethiopian officials a proposal to assist the Ministry of Women's Affairs with capacity building. Under this proposal agencies would voluntarily contribute to a fund that would be used to support staff training, purchases of computer equipment and vehicles, and logistical support to make the Ministry better equipped to fulfill its responsibilities.

7. (SBU) The Foreign Minister called the meeting on July 9 after investigations by Ethiopian authorities concluded that middlemen were actively buying and selling children for intercountry adoptions. Since Ambassador's and conoff's meeting with the Foreign Minister June 25, post had lobbied Ethiopian officials to reconsider the planned suspension. Post argued that reforms that address their concerns have been proposed and are doable, and that a suspension would likely result in thousands of children languishing in orphanages.

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