

5-17

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Subject: GOE TAKES STEPS TO REDUCE ADOPTIONS BY 90 PERCENT, THOUSANDS OF AMCITS TO BE AFFECTED
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Subject: GOE TAKES STEPS TO REDUCE ADOPTIONS BY 90 PERCENT, THOUSANDS OF AMCITS TO BE AFFECTED

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) On February 24, the Ministry of Women, Children, and Youth Affairs (MOWCYA) informed the Federal First Instance Court (FFIC) and adoption agencies that, effective March 10, 2011, it would only process a maximum of five cases a day for inter-country adoption (ICA), down from a current caseload of 35 to 50 cases per day. By Embassy calculations, such a move would result in a 90 percent reduction in children being placed into ICA and delays of up to one year for the more than 900 children that have already been referred to American citizens. For the parents who have begun their paperwork to adopt from Ethiopia, but have not been matched with a child, delays could exceed more than a year.

2. (SBU) In a strongly worded letter to the FFIC President, the MOWCYA State Minister indicated that this step was necessary to "work on quality and focus on more important strategic issues." In a meeting with Embassy officials, FFIC President Desalegn acknowledged the GOE's concerns over the integrity of the adoption process but called the letter a response to a "tug of war" between the court and key adoption ministry, and implored the Embassy to view this step as

- an internal discussion within the GOE and not a change in adoption policy. However, in a meeting with UNICEF officials on March 2, the MOWCYA Minister called these measures necessary, serious, and lasting, and indicated that the ministry is "at war with (adoption) agencies." While the Embassy supports GOE efforts to improve the integrity of the adoption process, we fear this abrupt change without a concrete plan behind it could not only slow down the process, but create more opportunities for abuse of the process. END SUMMARY.

IMPACT ON AMERICAN CITIZENS COULD BE SIGNIFICANT

3. (U) Overall, some 4800 children were placed into ICA from Ethiopia in 2010. Of that total, the U.S. Embassy issued 2513 IR3 and IR4 immigrant visas to Ethiopian children and their American citizen parents, with France, Spain, Italy, and other European countries comprising the remaining 2300 children being adopted overseas.

4. (U) On February 24, the Ministry of Women, Children, and Youth Affairs (MOWCYA) informed the Federal First Instance Court (FFIC) and all adoption agencies in country that, effective March 10, 2011, it would process a maximum of five cases a day for ICA. If placed into effect, the approval of adoption cases could decline from a current caseload of 35 to 50 cases a day, to up to five cases. In percentage terms this would mean an 85 to 90 percent reduction in the GOE's portfolio and no more than 500-600 children being processed through ICA worldwide. We estimate that between 250-300 cases would be processed for prospective U.S. adoptive families a year, placing incoming adoptions from Ethiopian between Ukraine and Taiwan according to the State Department's 2010 annual report on Inter-Country Adoption.

5. (U) MOWCYA engages in the Ethiopian adoption process twice: once, to approve a match between prospective parents and child, and once to issue final approval after the court hearing. Embassy calculates that, at any given time, some 600 prospective adoptive parents (PAPs) have received a referral from an U.S. based adoption service provider but are waiting for MOWCYA approval to schedule an Ethiopian court hearing, while another 300 adoptive parents have received a court decree but not the final MOWCYA approval letter to complete the adoption. For these 900 people the timeline to complete their adoption could be delayed by up to one year, causing heartache to those who were nearing the end of the adoption process and also requiring those prospective adoption children to spend many more months in orphanages or transitional homes. For the parents who have begun their paperwork to adopt from Ethiopia, but have not been matched with a child, delays could exceed more than a year.

EMBASSY STRESSES CLARITY FROM GOE

6. (SBU) Embassy officials met with FFIC President Desalegn Berhe on February 28 and stressed that the Embassy supports GOE efforts to make the process more secure. However, given the implications on prospective adoptive parents and the welfare of thousands of Ethiopian children, Embassy officials pressed the court to ensure that the matter is fully discussed within the GOE before implementing a decision.

7. (SBU) Desalegn called the matter a "tug of war" between the adoption judge and MOWCYA Child Protection Director, and advised the U.S. Embassy to consider the matter as an important beginning to discussions within the GOE over ICA but not a policy change at this time. The court added that it views the matter as a workload management issue, and would offer resources to MOWCYA if needed. UNICEF also indicated a willingness to provide technical support, if requested.

8. (SBU) On March 2, UNICEF officials met with the MOWCYA Minister Zenebu to gain clarity on this subject, discuss the ramifications of this decision, and address the growing concerns from UNICEF that thousands of children will remain in an overtaxed institutional care system well beyond current timeframes. Minister Zenebu, we have been told, declined to entertain the idea of outside assistance, capacity building, or seconded social workers to assist the Ministry so that cases can continue to be adjudicated at current levels. While making efforts to not call this a policy change, the Minister stressed to UNICEF that this decision is permanent and serious, and stated that "we are at war with (adoption) agencies." To date, we have not been able to meet with senior MOWCYA officials.

COMMENT: EVEN WITH THE BEST OF INTENTIONS, A ROCKY ROAD AHEAD

9. (SBU) Embassy has continually told the GOE that we support all of their efforts to improve the adoption process in Ethiopia, given the vulnerabilities at every level of the process (refrels). If, in fact, MOWCYA's intent is to look more closely at all ICA cases, we commend their efforts. However, we do not believe MOWCYA has a clear plan for what changes it will make in its screening process, nor has it asked for assistance to increase capacity – which makes us concerned that this change is simply to better manage workload, not to add value. We will continue to work with receiving countries, UNICEF, and the GOE to clarify how this change affects the process, and appreciate Department assistance in answering what will certainly be many inquiries about this change. Embassy has sent a draft adoption alert and press talking points separately to CA.

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