

Pacific Standard

NEWS

THEY STEAL BABIES, DON'T THEY?

Ethiopia, the Hague, and the rise and fall of international adoption. An exclusive investigation of internal U.S. State Department documents describing how humanitarian adoptions metastasized into a mini-industry shot through with fraud, becoming a source of income for unscrupulous orphanages, government officials, and shady operators—and was then reined back in through diplomacy, regulation, and a brand-new federal law.

E.J. GRAFF · NOV 24, 2014

It's taken 14 years and a lot of suffering by adoptive parents to get here—but in July 2014, a new United States law came into effect that requires *all* U.S. adoption agencies to be federally reviewed and accredited in order to help American families adopt children from other countries.

Sound obvious? It wasn't. For years, international adoption was the Wild West, almost entirely beyond the reach of federal regulation. That's because, for more than a century, the vast majority of adoptions took place domestically, usually arranged by religious or child welfare groups, overseen by individual states, which have traditionally been in charge of family law. But private and international adoption grew exponentially over the last several decades—and the federal government is only now catching up.

That regulatory lag means that scores of American adoption agencies were able to sell their services directly to hopeful parents on the principle of *caveat emptor*, with no direct federal oversight or regulation—working in countries that were far beyond the reach of their official state regulators. Americans trying to adopt from popular source countries like Russia, Guatemala, Vietnam, and Cambodia may not have realized it, but some agencies were sending money to poor countries in ways that induced fraud and corruption, leading the unscrupulous local “facilitators” to defraud, coerce, buy, and even abduct children from their birth families, for personal profit.

IN THE CASE OF INTER-COUNTRY ADOPTIONS, FAR TOO OFTEN, ORPHANS WERE "PRODUCED" BY UNSCRUPULOUS MIDDLEMEN WHO WOULD PERSUADE DESPERATELY POOR, UNEDUCATED, OFTEN ILLITERATE VILLAGERS WHOSE CULTURE HAD NO CONCEPT OF PERMANENTLY SEVERING BIOLOGICAL TIES TO SEND THEIR CHILDREN AWAY.

Of course, some agencies operated according to the highest ethical standards—but not all. And neither hopeful parents nor state governments were in a position to figure out which agencies were which. One country after another became an adoption hot spot, as a healthy and necessary adoption program for truly needy children became too popular—and locals would figure out how much money could be made by “finding” (or creating) “orphans.” And the U.S. government had no tools, or inadequate tools, with which to separate the truly humanitarian adoptions from the illicit trade. Prompted in part by the [Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism](#)’s articles on this subject, Congress finally passed a law closing important regulatory loopholes, which President Obama signed on January 1, 2012.

The new U.S. law, the [Universal Accreditation Act of 2012](#), came into effect very late for Ethiopia, one of the most recent adoption hot spots. Because the Schuster Institute has been reporting on the problem of fraud and corruption in international adoption since 2008, we had previously heard that Ethiopia was shot through with problems. The number of children adopted each year had spiked dangerously, from 165 in 2001 to 2,511 in 2010, an exponential increase. And so, in 2010, we submitted a Freedom of Information Act request, asking the U.S. State Department for any documents from the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa that mentioned adoptions from 2000 onward.

It took four years to get an answer—but here’s what we found.*

WHAT WILL BECOME OF THE AIDS ORPHANS?

“What Will Become of Africa’s AIDS Orphans?” read the headline on the *New York Times Magazine*’s December 22, 2002, [cover story](#). The article, by reporter Melissa Fay Greene, told the story of a group of orphans in Ethiopia whose parents had died of AIDS, and who had been rejected by their extended families and communities because of the stigma attached to the disease that killed their parents. The children were living in Layla House, an orphanage in Addis Ababa run by an American adoption agency, Adoption Advocates International. Greene wrote that an estimated “million” Ethiopian children were AIDS orphans, “most of whom end up living on the streets,” and quoted others predicting that most of them would become domestic servants—slaves, really—or child prostitutes.

But here was the story’s emotionally irresistible hook: A few lucky and grateful children were going to be adopted by American families. In fact, Greene revealed, she herself had adopted one of these children—Helen, who was becoming a wonderful part of her Atlanta family.

Greene painted a picture of adoption from Ethiopia—which was mostly accurate, at the time—that precisely matched what many Westerners profoundly want to be true in international adoption as a whole: the idea that “millions” of healthy children are institutionalized in under-developed parts of the world, desperately in need of families. Ethiopia, the story declared, could be a source of adoptions that were morally impeccable *and* emotionally fulfilling. It’s a story that appealed simultaneously to middle-class folks who were giving up on infertility treatments and to the evangelical parishioners whose ministers were exhorting them to fulfill biblical injunctions to care for orphans and to spread the Good News by adopting as many children as possible.

What could possibly go wrong?

The U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa knew what. In 2003, citing Greene’s article, the ambassador [cabled home](#) to the U.S. Secretary of State, “Because of recent articles ... we anticipate explosive growth in the adoption industry, and no let up in the number of individuals attempting to cash in on the process.”

Editors at the *New York Times Magazine* should also have had an inkling of what could go wrong. Just six months earlier, in June 2002, the *Times Magazine* had run a detailed investigative report on the criminal underpinnings of the international adoption disaster in Cambodia. The U.S. government had abruptly stopped processing orphan visas, which Americans needed to bring their adopted children home. And a U.S. ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) investigation and federal prosecution revealed that a former Hawaiian hula dancer named Lauryn Galindo and her former employees had developed an elaborate network that cheated Cambodian families out of their children: buying, defrauding, coercing, or even kidnapping healthy kids away; paying corrupt government officials for documents giving those children new orphan identities; and selling them to Americans for adoption.

IN SOME COUNTRIES, HUMANITARIAN ADOPTIONS METASTASIZE INTO A CORRUPT MINI-INDUSTRY SHOT THROUGH WITH FRAUD, EXPANDING DRAMATICALLY AND BECOMING A SOURCE OF INCOME FOR UNSCRUPULOUS LOCALS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS—UNTIL DEVELOPED COUNTRIES, APPALLED, STOP PERMITTING ADOPTIONS FROM THAT COUNTRY, THEREBY MAROONING THE CHILDREN WHO DO NEED NEW FAMILIES ABROAD.

So by the time Greene’s article was published in 2002, the U.S. State Department—and many regulators in the developed world—knew that what had gone wrong in Cambodia could go wrong almost anywhere. It had happened in Peru, Colombia, Romania; it was happening right then in Nepal, in Vietnam, and most notoriously in Guatemala. The problem was the underlying myth: While there are indeed *some* healthy infants, toddlers, and young children desperately in need of adoption, “millions” is inaccurate. As I have reported extensively elsewhere, most children in need of international adoption have special medical needs, trauma, or are five or older, like Greene’s Ethiopian-born daughter Helen.

Many poor nations’ international adoption programs started, as in the Ethiopia that Greene portrayed, with a few genuinely humanitarian adoptions, saving children from desperate circumstances. But once word spread among hopeful Western parents that healthy little ones were coming quickly out of a particular country, far more people would sign up than a small, poor country could effectively manage. National governments would become unable to continue carefully supervising every adoption. Demand would begin to outstrip supply, leading to that obvious two-part capitalist solution: increased prices and increased production.

In the case of inter-country adoptions, far too often, orphans were “produced” by unscrupulous middlemen who would persuade desperately poor, uneducated, often illiterate villagers whose culture had no concept of permanently severing biological ties to send their children away—saying that wealthy Westerners would educate their children and send them home at age 18, or would send a monthly stipend, or some other culturally comprehensible fostering plan.

Lake Awassa in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region, where roughly half of Ethiopian adoptions were coming from. (Photo: Achilli Family | Journeys/Flickr)

To be sure, not every international adoption program fits this pattern. In China, beginning in the 1990s, infant girls genuinely were abandoned by the thousands because of the toxic combination of China’s one-child policy and a cultural demand for sons; North American and European parents enthusiastically adopted that overflow, which has since dropped dramatically. In Russia and many former Soviet bloc countries, thousands of children remain cruelly warehoused in heartless institutions—but many have attachment disorders, fetal alcohol syndrome, or undisclosed medical issues that, understandably, are beyond what most Western parents feel prepared to cope with.

But in some countries, humanitarian adoptions metastasize into a corrupt mini-industry shot through with fraud, expanding dramatically and becoming a source of income for unscrupulous locals and government officials—until developed countries, appalled, stop permitting adoptions from that country, thereby marooning the children who *do* need new families abroad. After several years of investigative reporting into this pattern of fraud and corruption in international adoption, the Schuster Institute heard that that pattern was taking hold in Ethiopia. We requested, under the Freedom of Information Act, all adoption-related documents from the U.S. Embassy at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. We filed that request on April 23, 2010.

"[T]HE ORPHANAGE IS IN POOR CONDITION. ALL THE CHILDREN SHARE THE SAME ROOM. THE ROOM IS DARK AND SUFFOCATED... ONE OF THE TWO NANNIES HAS INFORMED ME THERE ARE TIMES WHEN THE ORPHANAGE HOUSE [SIC] ABOUT 15 CHILDREN."

Four years later, on May 13, 2014, we received hundreds of pages of these documents, which are posted in full at our website. In this article I will trace the story that those documents tell about inter-country adoption from Ethiopia—which is also the story of how international adoption has risen and fallen in one country after another, starting as a humanitarian venture before being corrupted by the flood of dollars and Euros into desperately poor countries.

But as I mentioned earlier, there's a hopeful ending to this story. The developed world has pulled together a treaty, the 1993 Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, that offers a regulatory system and child welfare guidelines. After 21 years, the Hague Convention has been fully joined by 93 countries, including—in 2008—the U.S. But Ethiopia is not one of them. Until now, because of a quirk in U.S. law, that meant that American agencies working in Ethiopia were *also* not governed by Hague rules. But in July 2014, the Universal Accreditation Act went into effect, a new U.S. law that plugs at least our part of that particular hole. When that law came into effect, the adoption agencies that most troubled the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa shut their doors and went out of business. At roughly the same time, the governments of the United States and Ethiopia agreed to work together to screen out fraud. The story of adoption from Ethiopia, in other words, is a story of a crisis—but a crisis in which those involved managed, at least partly, to eke out some significant regulatory, legal, and diplomatic improvements.

What's more, the developed world has gotten much more sophisticated about spotting and interrupting the pattern of rapidly increasing adoptions from one country, which has often signaled growing fraud and corruption. In fact, these documents suggest that the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa was far more aggressive than had been the case even in Vietnam about trying to prevent another adoption disaster like the ones suffered through elsewhere.

PHASE I: HUMANITARIAN ADOPTIONS

Melissa Fay Greene was correct: When she was there, international adoption from Ethiopia was a welcomed humanitarian venture for the desperately needy few. As she wrote, "It is the first recourse of everyone ethically involved with intercountry adoption to place orphans with relatives, with friends or with families within their home countries; no one imagines or pretends that adoption is a solution to a generation of children orphaned by disease. It is one very small and modest option, a case of families in industrialized nations throwing lifelines to individual children even as their governments fail to commit the money to turn back the epidemic" of AIDS, in the case of Ethiopia.

During these first years of the program, the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa sent cables back to the Department of State in D.C. explaining—praising, really—how carefully Ethiopian authorities were overseeing the effort. The country might have been a repressive totalitarian state, but in this, at least, it was admirable: As of 2003, it had licensed only three adoption agencies, two of them American, all of which were "expert at managing the Ethiopian adoption process."

As is true in most traditional cultures, the Embassy noted that, in the countryside, children were rarely abandoned. There were two exceptions. First, children orphaned by AIDS were, at that time, stigmatized by their families and communities; and second, families that migrated to Addis Ababa for work could, once there, become separated from their children, who were left homeless. A government ministry took guardianship, checked on whether they were truly orphaned or abandoned, and identified the few who needed foreign families.

AN EMBASSY RESEARCHER TALKED WITH SOMEONE IN THE WOLAYTA ZONE ADMINISTRATOR'S OFFICE WHO REPORTED ALLEGATIONS THAT LOCAL ORPHANAGES WERE BRIBING FAMILIES TO RELINQUISH THEIR CHILDREN, SAYING, "PARENTS WERE GIVEN EMPTY PROMISES AND DID NOT KNOW WHERE THEIR KIDS WERE GOING."

In August 2003, “the process of identifying orphans, approving adoptions, and processing immigrant visas for them is extremely rigorous here,” the U.S. Embassy wrote home to the Secretary of State’s office, in part because the Ethiopian government knew that “trafficking in children is a big business.” Yet even in that same cable, written less than a year after Greene’s *New York Times Magazine* article appeared, the Embassy noted that some unscrupulous individuals were going into villages to “collect children” by persuading parents to give them up.I

By 2006, the Embassy was cabling home that “Ethiopia is the fastest growing source country for adoptions by American citizens, and the rapid growth mimics the troubling pattern of programs that were eventually closed because of fraud concerns.” By rapid growth, the Embassy meant that while there had been 105 adoptions in 2000 and 165 in 2003, there had been 284 in 2004 and 442 in 2005—and the curve was about to go up much more steeply.

At the same time, the world—led by the U.S.—was finally offering help for countries devastated by the AIDS pandemic. George W. Bush’s 2003 life-saving PEPFAR (President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) began helping AIDS-stricken nations like Ethiopia in ways that included distributing anti-retrovirals, sponsoring education campaigns designed to reduce HIV transmission, helping grandmothers and family members care for AIDS orphans by offering micro-grants to feed children and pay school fees, and much more. Over time, it would turn out, this is what would most help Africa’s AIDS orphans: preventing them from being orphaned at all.II

But what did most Americans know about children in Ethiopia, beyond what they read in articles like Greene’s or heard from adoption agencies? Very little. Westerners continued to believe that needy Ethiopian orphans were filling the streets and abandoned infants were being found wrapped in palm leaves—and so they kept applying to adopt. In July 2005, Angelina Jolie adopted an Ethiopian baby, spurring vastly more interest. In March 2006, the U.S. Embassy reported so much dramatic growth that it asked for more staff to handle the flood of orphan visa applications. It worried a little about the Ethiopian government’s ability to keep up with the demand, while acknowledging that Ethiopian officials “appear determined to maintain legitimacy in Ethiopian adoption” and “insist on proper documentation before a child is released to a non-Ethiopian family.”

But a February 2007 cable noted that the number of applications to adopt from Ethiopia—and the number of American adoption agencies working in the country—were expanding “exponentially,” with eight times as many agencies working in country than had been there in 2000, for a total of 24. Contributing to that explosive growth was the fact that China was offering far fewer children for adoption, and Guatemalan adoptions were about to be closed to Americans because of systemic fraud and corruption. In other words, demand was being funneled toward Africa. Which is why the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa wrote, very diplomatically, “One agency recently was found to be working with an American facilitator who had previously presented problematic adoption cases,” although that agency dropped contact with the problematic facilitator. Still, there were too many agencies, too many children coming and going, too many people opportunistically looking in the countryside for “adoptable” children.III

PHASE II: THE GOLD RUSH

At last came the crisis that the Embassy officials had feared. By July 2008, the Embassy wrote, more than 70 licensed agencies were referring Ethiopian children for adoption, 24 of them American. There had been only three licensed agencies in 2000. The system was officially overwhelmed. Ethiopian officials wanted to bring adoption to a complete halt to clean things up—which would have stranded both those children who truly did need new homes, and would leave prospective adoptive parents heartbroken and frustrated, clutching pictures of their promised children but unable to bring them home.

The outskirts of Awassa, capital of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region. (Photo: Jens Klinzing/Wikimedia Commons)

And so in 2008, the Embassy’s adoption staffers began unannounced visits of local offices of American adoption agencies as well as the Ethiopian orphanages they were working with, to examine conditions and files, resulting in a flurry of reports and emails. When they found troubling situations—allegations that a particular orphanage was actively asking families to give up their children, or orphanages that appeared to be merely transit stations or “stash houses” to hold children for a few days before delivering them on order—the Embassy reported it to the Ethiopian government, which had the power to de-license the agencies involved. In January 2008, U.S. Embassy officials had a conference call with all the American adoption agencies working in Ethiopia. The goal was to impress upon everyone that the rules were the rules, and no child should be referred for adoption unless that child could be definitively shown to be an orphan under the U.S. immigration law’s definition—with the hope of preventing fraud.

THE U.S. COULD DO LITTLE IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY

Why were such contortions necessary? Why not just get rid of the unscrupulous actors and keep things open for the legitimate agencies? Many Americans assumed, and assume, that if U.S. officials spotted a problem in Ethiopian adoptions, they could unilaterally fix it: arresting the bad guys or shutting down the adoption agencies. But the central problem—in any country—is this: There is very little that the U.S. government can actually do to prevent or sanction fraud committed in another sovereign country.

The U.S. has no legal or regulatory control over what happens inside Ethiopia, or any other foreign nation, and zero legal authority over local child or family welfare services or orphanages. All that was the responsibility of the Ethiopian government. The U.S. couldn’t fine American agencies working in Ethiopia or investigate any suspicious increase in the number of “abandoned” babies showing up in a particular orphanage. The only tool that the U.S. has—and it’s a very unwieldy tool—is U.S. immigration law.

Here's how it works: Imagine that someone wants to adopt, and has heard wonderful things about adoption from Ethiopia. He finds an adoption agency that Ethiopia has licensed to work there, choosing it because he likes the director, or a friend praised it, or because the director is, like him, an evangelical Christian. After he gets his home study and other paperwork completed, and puts down a significant deposit, the adoption agency sends him a "referral," a picture and a dossier of information about a child it says needs a home. If he accepts this referral, saying that, yes, he wants to adopt this child, he may be asked to send more money to "reserve" her, lest she be offered to some other waiting family. With the information that your agency sends, he fills out the elaborate I-600 application, the "petition to classify orphan as an immediate relative," asking the U.S. government to grant him a visa to bring that child home.

For the hopeful parent, that's seen as nearly the end of the "paper pregnancy": He has endured home studies, fingerprinting, criminal records checks, agency shopping, months or years of waiting, and has finally fallen in love with the picture of this child, and can barely wait to bring her home to her room. But for the U.S. government, the I-600 orphan visa application is not the end; it's just the beginning. That is the very first time that the U.S. government is officially authorized by an American citizen to investigate that child's circumstances, to see whether she is an orphan under U.S. immigration law. The U.S. authorities have to hold adopting Americans responsible for whether that promised child is, in fact, free for adoption—on the fiction that the prospective parents have some independent knowledge about the child.

CONSULAR OFFICERS AND AID WORKERS BOTH KNEW THAT SOMETIMES AFRICAN ENTREPRENEURS FIGURE OUT THAT RUNNING AN ORPHANAGE CAN BE A PROFITABLE CASH BUSINESS: SOLICIT SOME CHILDREN FROM THE COUNTRYSIDE BY OFFERING TO FEED, HOUSE, AND EDUCATE THEM FOR FREE, AND THEN SOLICIT DONATIONS FROM AMERICAN CHURCHES OR EUROPEAN CHARITIES, SKIMMING PLENTY OFF THE TOP.

Of course, U.S. officials did not want to question the legality of the adoption at the very end, after an American family had legally adopted a child under Ethiopian law, making it impossible for them to fly home as a family. Doing so had led to disasters in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Guatemala. On the other hand, no Embassy official wanted to put an American seal of approval on what could be seen as, essentially, child trafficking for profit—a term that the U.S. didn't use officially, but which Embassy officials were using amongst themselves in these memos and emails. So the Embassy had to work with the adoption agencies, local orphanages, and Ethiopian authorities the way embassies always do: through influence and pressure, pushing them to follow the rules.IV

In 2008 U.S. officials did gain an important tool. Eight years earlier, the U.S. had passed a 2000 law called the Intercountry Adoption Act (IAA), authorizing entry into the Hague Convention on Inter-country Adoption. In 2008, the U.S. at last finalized and put into practice the detailed regulations that adoption agencies had to follow in order to be "Hague accredited." Although it was and is a highly imperfect system, the IAA and Hague accreditation at least gave the U.S. government a legal relationship with some adoption agencies—so the U.S. wasn't dealing only with the prospective adoptive parents, who had the least amount of information about what was going on.

But here's the loophole: Because Ethiopia had *not* joined the Hague convention, IAA accreditation was not required before American agencies could help Americans adopt from that country. Which meant that American agencies that had not passed a Hague review—which included some of the worst, with terrible records of child trafficking—were free to work in one of the countries that had the fewest protections in place from unscrupulous actors. And by this point, to the U.S. Embassy's frustration, Ethiopian authorities were apparently licensing every applicant—for reasons never made clear.

That doesn't mean everyone in the Ethiopian government was blind to the problems. In July of 2008, the Ethiopian foreign minister told U.S. ambassador Donald Yamamoto that the Ethiopian government was considering shutting down international adoption entirely, because the government "had concluded that middlemen were actively buying and selling children for intercountry adoptions."

According to the cable, the Embassy tried to persuade the Ethiopian minister not to do anything so drastic, since that would leave too many children and parents in "legal limbo": Americans who had adopted children under Ethiopian law would be unable, under American law, to take those children home. Tom DiFilipo, CEO of the Joint Council on International Children's Services (JCICS), offered the Ethiopian government \$220,000 to help pay for better oversight, ensuring that its members' donations came through JCICS so that no individual agency would be able to use its donations to pressure for more orphan referrals—although, of course, even JCICS's donation could be interpreted as paying to keep the adoption pipeline open. An agreement was never finalized, according to DiFilipo.

JCICS and the U.S. Embassy began urging the Ethiopian government to de-license at least half of those 70 adoption agencies, including—for the U.S.—the ones that had not received Hague accreditation by the U.S. State Department. Ultimately, the Ethiopian government did *not* suspend adoption and instead decided to review all of the agencies. But by September 2008, it was clear—to the Embassy's frustration—that troubled agencies would stay licensed, even those that had apparently lied about the children's origins, failed to keep records on children's backgrounds, changed children's ages to make them more "adoptable," shuffled children from one part of the country to another so their families couldn't be traced, and so on.

According to one U.S. Embassy document, Ethiopian officials said they didn't blame American adoption agencies for the irregularities; rather, they blamed Ethiopian orphanages for cutting corners to bring in money. Ethiopian officials bemoaned how little power the Ethiopian federal government had over regional and local governments that ran family policy, as is true in the U.S., where the federal government does not have the power to oversee, say, a Florida-based adoption agency (except, under the new law, if that adoption agency wants to arrange adoptions from overseas).

MANY POOR NATIONS' INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION PROGRAMS STARTED WITH A FEW GENUINELY HUMANITARIAN ADOPTIONS, SAVING CHILDREN FROM DESPERATE CIRCUMSTANCES. BUT ONCE WORD SPREAD, FAR MORE PEOPLE WOULD SIGN UP THAN A SMALL, POOR COUNTRY COULD EFFECTIVELY MANAGE.

As one Embassy official, Kelly Folliard, wrote to Abigail Rupp, the consular chief, "Last week I spoke at length with the orphanage director from Kebebe Tsehaye government-run orphanage.... He mentioned that they haven't received any new babies in over a month. Babies are typically brought in by local police, and the average is about 2-3 babies per week. The director is convinced that the police are being paid by private agencies to bring the babies to them."V

And so by 2009 the U.S. changed its focus and began trying to lean on the American adoption agencies that it had reason to believe were behaving unethically. (For more details, see the Schuster Institute's index of U.S. adoption agencies mentioned in these FOIAs, with the agencies' responses to what those State Department documents say.) For instance, Embassy staff visited the infamous Gelgela orphanage, which had been exposed in a scathing March 2010 Australian documentary as having solicited children directly from villagers. That documentary, and another report from CBS News, spoke with Americans Katie and Calvin Bradshaw, who had adopted three Ethiopian sisters through Christian World Adoption—only to find that the girls had expected to return to their middle-class family back in Ethiopia.

One Embassy visitor to the Gelgela orphanage, Belay Tadesse, wrote that “the orphanage is in poor condition. All the children share the same room. The room is dark and suffocated.... One of the two nannies has informed me there are times when the orphanage house [sic] about 15 children.” They weren’t the only ones concerned. One American couple who adopted from Gelgela wrote in an email to the Embassy: “We are very angered to learn that this child was much older than the age listed on his birth certificate.” Fraudulent birth certificates, in other nations’ adoption scandals, have often signaled that there was far more fraud below the surface—not just about age but about whether the child was truly abandoned, or was purchased.VI

SHAKING DOWN CHARITIES: ORPHANAGES AS CASH BUSINESSES

Other orphanages had problems as well. Consular officers and aid workers both knew that sometimes African entrepreneurs figure out that running an orphanage can be a profitable cash business: Solicit some children from the countryside by offering to feed, house, and educate them for free, and then solicit donations from American churches or European charities, skimming plenty off the top. Now such shady operators had yet another income stream: accept fees—sometimes the equivalent of a year’s middle-class salary in Ethiopia—for sending the children to international adoption agencies.

[T]HE DUWAW ORPHANAGE (DUWAW MEANS ‘DOING GOOD’ IN THE AFAR LANGUAGE) [WHICH] IS REALLY A SCHOOL. THEY FEED THE CHILDREN 3 TIMES A DAY. ADGEBUSH AYELE WHO RUNS DUWAW HAS WORKED WITH A TOTAL OF 800 CHILDREN, MOST OF THEM LIVING WITH THEIR PARENTS.... MS. AYELE APPARENTLY ALSO GETS FUNDING FROM USAID. SHE ALSO STATED THAT THE JAPANESE GOVERNMENT COMMITTED TO BUILD HER A SCHOOL IT APPEARS THAT SHE IS MAXIMIZING BENEFITS DERIVED FROM AID [SIC] DOLLARS. APPARENTLY OVER 50 CHILDREN HAVE BEEN PUT INTO THE ADOPTION STREAM FROM THE AWASH AREA.” THE DIRECTOR OF STILL ANOTHER ORPHANAGE, FAYA, “SEEMED TO IMPLY THAT IF CHILDREN WERE PROVIDED TO THE ADOPTION AGENCIES, THE ORPHANAGE WOULD OBTAIN PROJECT FUNDING.

Another fraud indicator was that roughly half of Ethiopian adoptions were coming from a single province: SNNPR, or Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People’s Region, the capital of which is Awassa. That suggested a regular production chain, with officials colluding with orphanages to “find” children available to exchange for cash.

In SNNPR an Embassy researcher talked with someone in the Wolayta Zone Administrator’s office who reported allegations that local orphanages were bribing families to relinquish their children, saying, “Parents were given empty promises and did not know where their kids were going.” As deputy consular section chief Christine Parker wrote about a similar situation, “I agree that there appears to be something improper about the relationship between the kebele [township] official and orphanage, and possibly agency, but without proof we’ve no choice but to move forward on these cases and keep our eye on this particular orphanage ... in future cases.”

Too many others were coming from Addis Ababa, where children were apparently being shipped to avoid background investigations in their home regions, where someone would know their family. In Addis Ababa, an investigator visited the Seleenat Orphanage, reporting:

THE ORPHANAGE IS A 5 ROOM HOUSE, BUT WE DID NOT SEE ANY EVIDENCE ONE WOULD EXPECT OF ACCOMMODATING CHILDREN THERE: NO BEDS, NO TOYS, NO NANNY OR OTHER ATTENDANT, NO CLOTHES, NO FOOD STORES. WHEN QUESTIONED FOR WHAT THE HOUSE IS USED, HE TOLD US IT IS A TEMPORARY PLACE FOR THE CHILDREN; THAT THEY STAY FOR JUST FOR FEW HOURS OR 1 DAY UNTIL THEY ARE TRANSFERRED TO A/ADABA.

That's a worrisome pattern, suggesting that this was not a child welfare center but, as another investigator put it, a "stash house," built not around caring for children in need but rather finding and ferrying children to paying clients.

The Embassy's site visits to agencies and orphanages did turn up some good news. For instance, one investigator reported that the Adera Child and Family Support Association, "is a clean and well-run facility," and "records were easily available and the secretary was able to find case files in less than one minute"—all good signs. The bad news: The orphanage didn't do any independent investigations of "how children referred by the government found themselves in need of care."

Similar evidence kept accumulating. An American group, PEAR (Parents for Ethical Adoption Reform), surveyed families that had adopted from Ethiopia, and, in 2010, sent the U.S. Embassy a report detailing those families' allegations. As the Embassy's Abigail Rupp wrote about the report:

[T]HESE ALLEGATIONS JUST LEND CREDENCE TO WHAT WE CONTINUE TO SUSPECT ABOUT WHAT'S HAPPENING IN ADOPTIONS HERE BUT HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO CONFIRM. THERE ARE SO MANY WEAKNESSES IN THE PROCESS THAT FRAUD/MISMANAGEMENT/MISINFORMATION CAN OCCUR AT EVERY LEVEL, AND THIS IS PROOF.

From inside of the adoption industry, a "representative of America World Adoption," an American agency that apparently had a representative in Addis Ababa, came forward to talk about troubles he or she saw within the Ethiopian adoption system: orphanage directors demanding more money and shaking down agencies to get paid per orphan; lies about where the children came from to circumvent regulators and make them easier to send abroad; refusing to allow Ethiopian families to adopt, when international guidelines clearly require that children are placed as close to home as possible, with international adoption only the very last resort. Children were being shipped quickly into international adoption, being made available as young as a few days or months—which meant that there had been no effort whatsoever to help out the birth family, and no effort to place the child with extended family or community. Money, in other words, was distorting the system, vacuuming children out of Ethiopia for profit.VII

But no matter what the Embassy believed it had found, for the most part, it almost always had to approve the adoption visas anyway; the standard for proving fraud was almost impossibly high. As one official wrote: "That's not to say that fraudulent or unethical acts on the part of an ASP [adoption service provider] should be ignored. It's just that where the adjudication is concerned, there are very narrow grounds under which it can affect the outcome." As Trish Maskew, now Chief of the State Department's Adoption Division, explained in her 2005 article "Child Trafficking and International Adoption, "Short of a confession, it is hard to fathom what kind of direct evidence the USCIS Officer in Charge could possibly unearth to support the charge of child buying." (I have explained more about this here.)

PHASE III: CUTTING DOWN ON ADOPTIONS

When Melissa Fay Greene wrote in 2002 about adopting her Ethiopian-born daughter, the U.S. State Department reported issuing 105 orphan visas. By 2010, that number had risen to 2,511—an astonishing rate of increase.

But in 2011, that number began to drop. That year, the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa **reported** that the Ethiopian government’s Ministry of Women, Children, and Youth Affairs (MOWCYA) would be slowing down adoptions dramatically and was “at war” with the adoption agencies, trying to reduce the fraud. But the U.S. Embassy and UNICEF didn’t want a shutdown; they wanted a clean-up, and together tried to persuade the Ethiopian government to take more effective action, lest many genuinely needy children be stranded there.VIII

At the same time, the U.S. Embassy was getting fuller information about fraud from unhappy adoptive parents. In early 2012, consular chief Scott Riedmann wrote to MOWCYA that since 2010, Embassy officials had been told such various problems as: adoption agencies charging “orphanage fees” for referrals, which was illegal under Ethiopian law; orphanages promising to pay birthparents for their children; orphanages and agencies colluding to falsify children’s documents “in order to circumvent Ethiopian and American adoption laws.” One adoption agency—unnamed in this document—was allegedly partnering with an orphanage that “had convinced certain kebeles [townships] to require single parents in their jurisdiction to ‘register’ with the local government so that parents can later be pressured to relinquish their children.”

NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS WOULD BECOME UNABLE TO CONTINUE CAREFULLY SUPERVISING EVERY ADOPTION. DEMAND WOULD BEGIN TO OUTSTRIP SUPPLY, LEADING TO THAT OBVIOUS TWO-PART CAPITALIST SOLUTION: INCREASED PRICES AND INCREASED PRODUCTION.

One birth mother who had worked with another agency later revealed that she had “lied in court about her desire to give up her child because she had been intimidated by the ASP [adoption service provider, or agency] into doing so.” Meanwhile, the Embassy was hearing from some adoptive parents “being told that their children’s biological parents are deceased only to find out that that the opposite is true once the children are old enough to express themselves in English.” An Embassy document stated that another orphanage reportedly offered “grants” to women to start small businesses—but those grants apparently went specifically to pregnant women who then relinquished their newborns for adoption.IX

In 2011, the Embassy continued stressing to the agencies that they “ask for a regular accounting of the funds they give to an orphanage ... [and conduct] regular audits. When we do field investigations, we do look at orphanages’ books (if they even have them) and are often shocked at their inability to account for major sums of funds.... Orphanages should be able to estimate how much it costs to support each child.” And the Embassy kept pushing the agencies to question and verify what the documents said, especially when the circumstances sounded somewhat incredible. “There are basic questions that are never asked until cases get to us,” wrote Abigail Rupp.

Thomas DiFilipo, president and CEO of the Joint Council on International Children’s Services (JCICS), said in a recent interview that while the effort to end fraud was laudable, even urgent, the way it was done caused problems. “A lot of orphanages were closed down systematically,” he said, which turned into a “disaster for many children”—the children were rightfully moved from problematic orphanages into other orphanages, however no funding was provided to care for those additional children. “The goal should be caring for children in a really healthy way,” DiFilipo said. “Sometimes you go to end corruption and end up hurting kids in a different way.”

BREAKTHROUGH!

In several other countries, such as Cambodia, Guatemala, and Vietnam, where fraud had become endemic, that's precisely what happened: The U.S. felt it had no choice but to shut down adoptions entirely, concluding that the national government was not ever going to become serious about rooting out the problems. But in Ethiopia, the U.S. Embassy believed it had found a partner, or so it wrote back to D.C. headquarters in 2011. Together, the two governments instituted a new procedure through which the Ethiopian government authorized the Embassy and its internal partner, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), to investigate whether children were free for adoption *before* Americans adopted that child in Ethiopian court. The new process, called PAIR (Pre-Adoption Immigration Review), meant that American families wouldn't be stuck in limbo—with an Ethiopian adoption but no visa to bring the child home.

With PAIR in place in Ethiopia, the numbers of adoptions have been decreasing every year, presumably because the two governments have succeeded in reducing the numbers of children who are fraudulently offered up. By 2013, only 993 Ethiopian children were adopted to the U.S. That's still nearly 10 times the number that were adopted in 2002, the year Melissa Greene published the article that kicked off the rush to adopt from Ethiopia.

A woman with some livestock on the top of Awassa Hill, outside of the capital of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region. (Photo: Jens Klinzing/Wikimedia Commons)

As of July 2014, the U.S. now has another tool to help prevent adoption fraud, in Ethiopia and elsewhere: the Universal Accreditation Act (UAA) of 2012. The original Hague authorization bill, the IAA of 2000, required that adoption agencies (traditionally regulated only by the states) get federally reviewed and accredited before bringing in children from other countries that had ratified the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, with its minimal standards for child welfare and protection against trafficking. Those regulations went into effect in 2008, and were an enormous step forward, giving the U.S. government at least some legal relationship to adoption agencies.

But as I mentioned earlier, that left an enormous loophole: Adoption agencies that would or could not get accredited were free to arrange adoptions from countries that had not ratified the Hague—which meant non-accredited agencies were free to work in Ethiopia. Since July, the UAA has required *all* adoption agencies to receive Hague accreditation before working internationally, whether or not a particular country has joined the Hague. Groups concerned with ethical adoption have championed the bill. “We extend our appreciation and thanks to those Members of Congress who championed this legislation and the increased protections it provides to children and families,” wrote the Joint Council. Similarly, Holt International, one of the most respected organizations working in international adoption, wrote that it “is grateful” for Congress’s new law “to improve the standards for all intercountry adoptions to ensure equity and protection for children and families.”

"THE ORPHANAGE IS A 5 ROOM HOUSE, BUT WE DID NOT SEE ANY EVIDENCE ONE WOULD EXPECT OF ACCOMMODATING CHILDREN THERE: NO BEDS, NO TOYS, NO NANNY OR OTHER ATTENDANT, NO CLOTHES, NO FOOD STORES. WHEN QUESTIONED FOR WHAT THE HOUSE IS USED, HE TOLD US IT IS A TEMPORARY PLACE FOR THE CHILDREN; THAT THEY STAY FOR JUST FOR FEW HOURS OR 1 DAY UNTIL THEY ARE TRANSFERRED."

According to staffers of Representative Albio Sires, who sponsored the Universal Accreditation Act in the House, his office held Congressional hearings that eventually led to this legislation prompted by my first article on fraud and corruption in international adoptions. While not agreeing with all that was written, the Joint Council's Tom DiFilipo agreed that my work influenced changes in international adoption policy, saying that his organization and others in the adoption community had used that article to help make the case for the new law. As he put it, “Your article in *Foreign Policy* brought to light some legitimate concerns that the Joint Council felt could be mitigated by the Universal Accreditation Act.”

International adoption is not yet perfectly regulated. But the combination of the IAA and the UAA now offer the U.S. government some oversight and legal relationship with individuals or agencies in other countries that are trying to find children for Americans who want to adopt internationally.

Here's some anecdotal evidence that these new laws may be working: As the UAA came into effect, several of the agencies that especially worried the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa went out of business.

CONCLUSION

The last document in this stack of FOIAs is dated April 2012—but, of course, that wasn't the end of the story. According to the U.S. State Department, at the peak in 2010, Americans adopted 2,511 Ethiopian-born children, an astonishing 23-fold increase from 2002, when the number was 105. In 2011, U.S. and Ethiopian authorities began working together to investigate a child's origins before permitting an Ethiopian adoption, a process that became mandatory in September 2013—bringing down those numbers to something more manageable. By 2013, Americans adopted 993 Ethiopian-born children. American and Ethiopian vigilance appears to be paying off. And now that the UAA has gotten rid of agencies that cannot or will not pass regulatory inspection, adoptions from Ethiopia should become even more trustworthy. While it is too soon to declare victory, the U.S.-Ethiopia adoption system surely makes it more likely that adoptive families are taking in children who are truly in need of new homes.

Of course, no matter how many laws and regulations are in place, some people will still cheat and steal for profit. In February 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice indicted and arrested four employees of South Carolina-based International Adoption Guides for attempting to defraud the U.S. government to enable adoptions from Ethiopia. (IAG and these four individuals failed to respond to requests for comment.)

A more recent adoption hot spot is the Democratic Republic of the Congo, whose government has "stressed that it considers no intercountry adoptions ... to be completely free of fraud." There too numbers were escalating faster than the government could oversee the adoption industry. In 2010, Americans adopted 41 children from the DRC; in 2011, 133; in 2012, 240; in 2013, 311. In July 2014, the country shut the doors to all international adoptions for now.

It's been 14 years since the U.S. Senate ratified our nation's entry into the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption. Slowly, the State Department and Congress have put into place the rules, regulations, and laws that make it possible to keep open international adoption agencies that do their work carefully and respectfully—while at the same time closing agencies that "find" children for adoption through bribery, deception, coercion, and kidnapping. With the right kind of oversight, international adoption may be able to shed some of its systemic problems. It will never be perfect, but it can return to its roots as a system that finds families for needy children, instead of looking for children to fill families.

In 2004, the peak year for international adoptions, Americans adopted nearly 23,000 children from other countries, according to the U.S. State Department. For years, those numbers had increased every year, mostly infants and toddlers. By 2012, Americans adopted only 8,668, and a larger proportion were older and special needs—the children who most urgently *do* need new homes abroad, according to international child welfare experts. And as surprising as it may sound, that's good news, for families and children around the world.

*As of this writing, Americans had adopted more than 14,000 Ethiopian-born children between 1999 and 2013, according to the U.S. State Department, and are continuing to adopt from that country in numbers that make it our second-most popular adoption source in the world, after China.

*Return to where you were in the story.

For more information about or to read the FOIAed documents mentioned in this article, go to the Schuster Institute site [Officials Review International Adoption From Ethiopia](#), where you will find [the documents](#) themselves; an [index](#) of all U.S. adoption agencies and Ethiopian orphanages mentioned in these documents; and [adoption agencies' responses](#), corrections, clarifications, and comments on these State Department documents.

FOOTNOTES: IN THE EMBASSY'S OWN WORDS

THE STRONG, COHESIVE NATURE OF THE EXTENDED FAMILY MAKES IT UNLIKELY THAT A CHILD WITH A LIVING PARENT WILL BE ABANDONED. OTHER RELATIVES OR COMMUNITY MEMBERS OFTEN TAKE IN CHILDREN WHO HAVE LOST BOTH PARENTS. THIS IS NOT TRUE OF CHILDREN ORPHANED BY AIDS, WHICH CARRIES A SIGNIFICANT SOCIAL STIGMA. THE HIGH HIV INFECTION RATE, THE EFFECTS OF ENDEMIC MALARIA AND TUBERCULOSIS, LINGERING DROUGHT, DISLOCATIONS OF ENTIRE COMMUNITIES DUE TO ETHIOPIA'S CHRONIC FOOD CRISIS, AND CIVIL UNREST ... ARE HAVING AN INCREASINGLY NEGATIVE IMPACT ON RURAL COMMUNITIES....

IN THE CAPITAL, THOUGH, IT IS A DIFFERENT STORY. ETHIOPIAN OFFICIALS TELL US THERE ARE MANY ABANDONED AND DESERTED CHILDREN OF ALL AGES IN ADDIS ABABA. THE NATIONWIDE HARDSHIPS ... ARE SENDING FLOODS OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS INTO THE CITY. CHILDREN ARRIVE WITH A PARENT BUT OFTEN ARE SEPARATED FROM THEM BY THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF LIFE ON THE STREETS OF THIS DESPERATELY POOR CAPITAL CITY.

THE 10 PERCENT PLUS NATIONAL HIV/AIDS INFECTION RATE IS CREATING AN INCREASING NUMBER OF ORPHANS OF ALL AGES....

ORPHANS AVAILABLE FOR INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION ARE IDENTIFIED AS SUCH BY THE MINISTRY OF LABOUR AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS, CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS OFFICE (MOLSA).

—[The Ethiopian Adoption Process, Addis Ababa CABLE R251402Z AUG 03](#)

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IN ETHIOPIA, IT IS EXTREMELY EASY TO OBTAIN GENUINE DOCUMENTS THAT CONTAIN COMPLETELY FALSE INFORMATION.... [THE U.S. EMBASSY] LARGELY RELIES ON FIELD INVESTIGATIONS TO VERIFY CLAIMED RELATIONSHIPS AND IDENTITIES.

—[Response to \[Redacted\] - Senator Leahy Interested Addis Ababa CABLE P071423Z SEP 04](#)

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GIVEN THE EASE OF PROCESSING, LOW FEES, AND SKYROCKETING INTEREST AMONG BOTH AMERICANS AND EUROPEANS, THE POSSIBILITY OF ADOPTION-RELATED FRAUD IS A MAJOR POST CONCERN.

—[As U.S. Adoptions in Ethiopia Sharply Increase, Officers Increase Outreach to GOE, Agencies CABLE R101246Z MAR 06](#)

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WE WANT TO MAKE SURE AGENCIES ARE FULLY AWARE OF THE REQUIREMENTS THAT ADOPTIVE CHILDREN TRULY QUALIFY AS ORPHANS.... IN RECENT WEEKS WE HAVE SEEN CASES THAT HAVE RAISED CONCERNS. THEY MAKE US QUESTION WHETHER SOME AGENCIES UNDERSTAND THIS CRITICAL ASPECT OF U.S. IMMIGRATION LAW.... WE DO NOT WANT TO BE IN THE POSITION WHERE WE MUST DECIDE NOT TO APPROVE AN IMMIGRANT VISA FOR AN ADOPTED CHILD.... IN MOST CASES, THE ADOPTING PARENTS HAVE ENTERED THE PROCESS IN GOOD FAITH; THEY HAVE COMPLIED WITH ALL THE REQUIREMENTS, ETC. THEY ARE RELYING UPON THE AGENCY THEY HAVE ENGAGED TO KNOW U.S. IMMIGRATION LAW AND TO REFER TO THEM ONLY A CHILD WHO QUALIFIES AS AN ORPHAN. THEY SHOULD BE ABLE TO EXPECT THAT THEIR AGENCY IS COMPETENT TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN ADOPTABLE CHILD AND ONE THAT IS NOT ADOPTABLE UNDER U.S. IMMIGRATION LAW.

WE ARE FINDING THAT SOME AGENCIES KNOW THE LAW VERY WELL AND HAVE EXPLICIT PROCEDURES DESIGNED TO ENSURE THAT ONLY ADOPTABLE ORPHANS ARE REFERRED TO AMERICAN ADOPTABLE PARENTS. WE ARE ALSO FINDING THAT SOME AGENCIES DO NOT SEEM TO UNDERSTAND THE CRITERIA, OR THINK THAT THE CRITERIA ARE NOT IMPORTANT, OR ARE NOT ENFORCED, OR ARE FLEXIBLE.

—Conference Call, January 8, 2008

*Return to where you were in the story.

DR. ALESSANDRO CONTICINI FROM THE NGO PLAY THERAPY AFRICA ... EXPRESSED CONCERN AT MANY OF THE SAME ISSUES THAT WE HAVE HAD—NAMELY:

- CONFLICT BETWEEN THE MINISTRY OF JUSTICE ... AND THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN'S AFFAIRS [MOWA] HAS LED TO SHODDY RECORD-KEEPING AND NO CLEAR AGENCY IN CHARGE.**
 - THERE ARE NO MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR CHILD-CARE INSTITUTIONS IN ETHIOPIA.**
 - POST-ADOPTION REVIEWS BY MOWA ARE MORE OR LESS USELESS BECAUSE OFFICIALS ARE GOING ON A FREE TRIP TO A NICE COUNTRY....**
 - IN SUCH A POOR COUNTRY, THE OBVIOUS MONEY THAT WASHES THROUGH AGENCIES IS A DRAW FOR UNSCRUPULOUS ACTORS.**
 - CLAIMS THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO ARE IN THE COUNTRY TRYING TO CONVINCE POOR PARENTS TO GIVE UP CHILDREN.**
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—Notes on Meeting With European Consuls Focus on Adoptions

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GENERALLY SPEAKING THE [GELGELA] ORPHANAGE IS IN POOR CONDITION. ALL THE CHILDREN SHARE THE SAME ROOM. THE ROOM IS DARK AND SUFFOCATED.... ACCORDING TO THE DIRECTOR, THE ORPHANAGE HOUSES THREE CHILDREN AT THE MAXIMUM. HOWEVER, ONE OF THE TWO NANNIES HAS INFORMED ME THERE ARE TIMES WHEN THE ORPHANAGE HOUSE [SIC] ABOUT 15 CHILDREN....

[ONE WORKER] ASSERTED THAT THE ORPHANAGE CONDUCTS INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATION TO MAKE SURE THAT THE INFORMATION PROVIDED BY THE KEBELE [LOCAL GOVERNMENT] IS CORRECT.... THEY HAVE RETURNED ONE CASE WHICH WAS PRESENTED TO THEM THAT BOTH THE PARENTS ARE DECEASED. THEY FOUND BOTH PARENT AND RETURNED THE CASE.

THIS BEING SAID NONE OF THE FOUR CASES I BROUGHT WITH ME WERE INVESTIGATED.... NOR DOES THE ORPHANAGE MAKE DOCUMENTATION OF THEIR INVESTIGATIONS.

DOCUMENTATION IS THE OTHER AREA OF PROBLEM I OBSERVED. THERE IS ONE REGISTER WHERE BASIC INFORMATION OF THE ORPHAN AND PARENTS ARE FILLED.... IT IS DIFFICULT TO TRACE THE CASES AS THE PAPERS ARE PUT HERE AND THERE.

THE KEBELE USES THE SAME TEMPLATE FOR ALL THE CASES—I FOUND THE SAME INFORMATION IN EVERY CASES. THE FOCUS IS MORE ON ESTABLISHING THE POVERTY OF THE RELINQUISHING PARENT, NOT LEGALITY OF THE CASE. THEY HAVE A TENDENCY TO DO ANYTHING AS LONG AS THE APPLICANTS CAN BRING THREE WITNESSES.

THE ADDRESS OF THE RELINQUISHING PARENTS AND ALL THE WITNESSES IS NOT KEPT, EITHER BY THE KEBELE OR THE ORPHANAGE, WHICH MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO GET IN TOUCH WITH THEM WHEN NEEDED.

THERE IS SIMILARITY OF ALL THE CASES SUCH AS ALL THE MOTHER [SIC] COME FROM OTHER PLACES, THEY WERE PREGNANT WHEN THEY CAME, MOST OF THEM WORK IN BARS AND MOST OF THEM SUDDENLY CHANGE THEIR ADDRESSES. THERE SEEMS TO BE SOMEBODY ADVISING THE RELINQUISHING MOTHERS TO PRESENT THEIR CASES IN SUCH A WAY TO GET MORE ACCEPTANCE.

—Gelgela Bench Majority Trip Report, March 29, 2010, Belay A Tadesse

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- **ONE FIVE-DAY-OLD BABY WAS MADE AVAILABLE FOR ADOPTION, “NOT ALLOWING SUFFICIENT TIME FOR POST-BIRTH COUNSELING OF BIRTH MOTHER.”**
 - **CHILDCARE INSTITUTIONS ARE REQUESTING FUNDING FROM ADOPTION AGENCIES ON A PER CHILD BASIS (E.G., \$20,000 FUNDING QUID PRO QUO 10 CHILD REFERRALS.)**
 - **GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS “AT ALL LEVELS ARE RECEIVING INDUCEMENTS IN TERMS OF TRIPS TO U.S. (WITH LARGE PER DIEMS). THIS IS BEING DONE THROUGH NATIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION OR JOINT COUNCIL TO AVOID NATIONAL CORRUPTION ACTS....**
 - **CHILDCARE INSTITUTION DIRECTORS ARE REQUESTING DIRECT DEPOSIT INTO ACCOUNTS AS “TOP-OFF” FOR SALARY. GAVE EXAMPLE OF ONE PERSON IN HOSANNA REQUESTING A DIRECT MONTHLY DEPOSIT OF \$3,000....**
 - **SIBLINGS NOT PLACED WITH SAME FAMILY, SAME AGENCY, OR EVEN SAME COUNTRY.**
 - **FALSE DOCUMENTATION.**
 - **ISSUES AROUND INFORMED CONSENT....**
 - **BIRTH FAMILIES ARE RECEIVING APPROXIMATELY 500 BIRR FOR RELINQUISHMENT OR A COW. GAVE EXAMPLE OF VISITING A BIRTH FAMILY AND THEY SPECIFICALLY ASKED HER FOR A COW....**
 - **IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT THESE EXAMPLES WERE ABOUT SOME OF THE TOP EIGHT U.S. AGENCIES; 7 OF WHICH ARE HAGUE ACCREDITED IN THE U.S.....**
 - **ONE SPECIFIC CHILD CARE INSTITUTION TAKES ILL BABIES AS REFERRALS AND THERE IS QUESTION AS TO WHETHER SHE PURPOSELY DOES THIS TO USE DEAD BABIES’ DOCUMENTS TO PROCESS CHILDREN WITH NO DOCUMENTATION.**
 - **PREGNANT WOMAN OR VULNERABLE FAMILY IDENTIFIED BY FACILITATOR AFFILIATED WITH CHILDCARE INSTITUTION. UPON BIRTH OF CHILD, DOCUMENTATION IS QUICKLY ARRANGED (OR ARRANGED BEFORE) BY LOCAL OFFICIALS. 2. CHILD IS IMMEDIATELY REFERRED TO AN ADOPTION AGENCY BY THE CHILDCARE INSTITUTION (WHO RECEIVES FUNDS PER REFERRAL.) 3. CHILD MOVED INTO A TRANSITION HOME AS SOON AS POSSIBLE ... AND IS REFERRED TO ADOPTIVE FAMILY. CHILDREN AS YOUNG AS 3-4 MONTHS LEAVING THE COUNTRY....**
 - **IN SPITE OF MORE THAN 4,700 CHILDREN BEING PLACED IN ICA [INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION] LAST YEAR, THE CHILDCARE INSTITUTIONS CLAIM THAT THEY DO NOT HAVE ANY AVAILABLE CHILDREN FOR DOMESTIC ADOPTION.**

—Notes From Meeting With Representative of America World Adoption, September 17, 2010

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OUR DATA IS BASED ON 50 INTERVIEWS WITH BIRTH RELATIVES CONDUCTED BETWEEN JUNE AND AUGUST 2011.

WE FOUND THAT IN 72% OF THE BIRTH RELATIVE INTERVIEWS INFORMATION AVAILABLE TO RELINQUISHING RELATIVES WAS INADEQUATE OR FACTUALLY INCORRECT, OR THERE WERE OTHER SERIOUS FRAUD CONCERNS RAISED. IN ABOUT 50% OF THE CASES, THE BIRTH RELATIVE INTERVIEW CONTRACTED THE FACTS OF THE CASE AS PRESENTED IN DOCUMENTS OR REVEALED NEW INFORMATION (AN “UNKNOWN” BIRTH FATHER WAS READILY IDENTIFIED BY NAME, FOR EXAMPLE).

IN 22% OF THE INTERVIEWS, BIRTH RELATIVES STATED THAT THEY BELIEVED THE CHILD WOULD PERMANENTLY RETURN TO ETHIOPIA AT THE AGE OF 18. THESE BIRTH RELATIVES CITED CONVERSATIONS WITH ORPHANAGE SOCIAL WORKERS AS THE PRINCIPAL SOURCE OF THIS INFORMATION. IN 8% OF THE CASES THE RELINQUISHING RELATIVE EXPECTED SOME SORT OF FINANCIAL COMPENSATION FOR RELINQUISHING THE CHILD. SOME OF THESE BIRTH RELATIVES ALSO INDICATED THAT THEY BELIEVED THE ADOPTIVE PARENTS WOULD SEND FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO THEM FROM THE UNITED STATES, OR THAT THEY EXPECTED THE CHILD TO SEND BACK FINANCIAL SUPPORT ONCE THEY REACHED THE AGE OF 18.

IN SOME CASES, IT APPEARS THAT THE BIRTH RELATIVE WAS COACHED TO PROVIDE A SPECIFIC STORY, ALIGNING WITH THE STORY PRESENTED TO THE COURT. WE GENERALLY HEARD “BOILERPLATE” ANSWERS IN CASES INVOLVING A SEXUAL ASSAULT. WHILE WE UNDERSTAND THAT A YOUNG VICTIM OF A SEXUAL ASSAULT MIGHT NOT BE CANDID TO US ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE, THE BASIC OUTLINE OF THE STORY VARIED LITTLE FROM TELLING TO TELLING.

—Zone Info for Health Care Worker/Relinquishment Concerns, October 5, 2011

***Return to where you were in the story.**

THE STATE OF ADOPTIONS IN ETHIOPIA HAS NEVER BEEN MORE FRAGILE. EVIDENCE OBTAINED DURING 32 BIRTH MOTHER INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED BY CONSULAR STAFF IN MARCH 2011 AND A FIELD INVESTIGATION INTO THE PRACTICES OF TWO ADOPTION SERVICE PROVIDERS (ASPS) AND THEIR PARTNER ORPHANAGES CONCLUDES THAT AN INCREASING NUMBER OF AGENCIES ARE EMPLOYING ORPHANAGES TO UNETHICALLY RECRUIT CHILDREN INTO INTER-COUNTRY ADOPTION (ICA). WHEN COUPLED WITH THE GOVERNMENT OF ETHIOPIA'S (GOE) DECISION TO SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCE ADOPTION PROCESSING BY 60 TO 90 PERCENT AND THE PENDING CLOSURE OF SIX ORPHANAGES IN SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA WITH TIES TO 17 U.S. ASPs, THE WAY FORWARD IS INCREASINGLY UNCLEAR....

EMBASSY OFFICIALS HAVE OBTAINED INFORMATION FROM A RELIABLE SOURCE OUTLINING THE GOE'S PLAN TO CLOSE NINE ORPHANAGES IN THE SOUTHERN NATIONS, NATIONALITIES, AND PEOPLE'S REGION DUE TO THE FAILURE FOR THESE INSTITUTIONS TO ADHERE TO THE GUIDELINES OF CARE OUTLINED BY THE REGIONAL GOVERNMENT.... SINCE JUNE 2009 THE U.S. EMBASSY HAS ISSUED MORE THAN 1,190 IMMIGRANT VISAS TO ORPHANED CHILDREN FROM THESE SOON TO BE CLOSED FACILITIES, APPROXIMATELY 32 PERCENT OF THE ENTIRE NUMBER OF CHILDREN WHO HAVE IMMIGRATED TO THE UNITED STATES THROUGH ADOPTION OVER THE LAST TWO YEARS. THE GOE IS WORKING WITH UNICEF TO CREASE A PLAN FOR THE ESTIMATED 600 CHILDREN CURRENTLY IN THESE FACILITIES, WHICH WOULD LIKELY INCLUDE A DE-INSTITUTIONALIZATION EFFORT AIMED AT FINDING ALTERNATIVE CHILD CARE SOLUTIONS OR RETURNING SOME CHILDREN TO THEIR BIRTH FAMILIES....

IN MARCH, U.S. EMBASSY STAFF CONDUCTED 32 BIRTH MOTHER INTERVIEWS.... ALL WERE CASES INVOLVING CHILDREN WITH UNKNOWN BIOLOGICAL FATHERS. HOWEVER DURING OUR INTERVIEW [WITH TEN BIRTH MOTHERS], THE BIOLOGICAL MOTHER NOT ONLY WILLINGLY AND READILY IDENTIFIED THE PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN FATHER, BUT INDICATED THAT SHE HAD BEEN ENGAGED IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BIOLOGICAL FATHER FOR A SIGNIFICANT PERIOD OF TIME.... IN ADDITION, IN ONE INTERVIEW, A BIRTH MOTHER STATED THAT SHE WAS APPROACHED ON THE STREET BY ORPHANAGE STAFF TO RELINQUISH HER BABY BEFORE SHE HAD GIVEN BIRTH. WHEN SHE EXPRESSED HER WILLINGNESS, ORPHANAGE OFFICIALS PAID A VISIT TO HER HOME WHERE THEY ALSO ASKED IF SHE WOULD BE WILLING TO RELINQUISH HER TWO YEAR OLD AS WELL....

ON MARCH 31, 2011, A BIRTH MOTHER INFORMED EMBASSY STAFF ... THAT ORPHANAGE WORKER [HTTP://WWW.CNN.COM/2009/WORLD/AMERICAS/09/12/GUATEMALA.CHILD.ABDUCTION/INDEX.HTML? EREF=RSS_LATESTS](http://www.cnn.com/2009/world/americas/09/12/guatemala.child.abduction/index.html?eref=rss_latests) AT [REDACTED] ENCOURAGED HER TO RELINQUISH HER CHILD FOR INTER-COUNTRY ADOPTION BY TELLING HER THAT HER CHILD WOULD RETURN TO LIVE WITH HER WHEN SHE TURNED 18, AND THAT DURING THE INTERVENING YEARS SHE WOULD RECEIVE REGULAR UPDATES ON THE CHILD AND BE ABLE TO EXCHANGE CORRESPONDENCE. THE BIRTH MOTHER ALSO SAID THAT SHE SIGNED A RELINQUISHMENT STATEMENT AT THE ORPHANAGE BUT SHE COULD NOT READ AND THEREFORE DID NOT KNOW WHAT IT SAID. WHEN EMBASSY STAFF INFORMED THE BIRTH MOTHER THAT THERE WAS NO REQ THAT BIRTH PARENTS RECEIVE REGULAR UPDATES, NOR THAT THE CHILD THEY WOULD RELINQUISH WOULD RETURN TO ETHIOPIA, SHE STATED REPEATEDLY AND DEFINITELY THAT, HAD SHE KNOWN THAT INFORMATION, SHE WOULD NOT HAVE RELINQUISHED CUSTODY OF HER CHILD. THE BIRTH MOTHER SIGNED A STATEMENT AT THE EMBASSY REQUESTING THE RETURN OF HER CHILD. WHEN [CONSULAR OFFICERS] INFORMED THE [REDACTED ADOPTION AGENCY] OF THE BIRTH MOTHERS STATEMENT, BOTH THE LOCAL REPRESENTATIVE AND THE U.S. DIRECTOR INDICATED THAT THE BIRTH MOTHERS WISHES WERE LESS IMPORTANT THAN THEIR PROSPECTIVE ADOPTION PARENT CLIENT, AND ASKED US TO CONTINUE PROCESSING THE CASE DESPITE THE BIRTH MOTHERS STATEMENT....

EMBASSY STAFF CONDUCTED A FIELD INVESTIGATION INTO THE ACTIVITIES OF [REDACTED] AND THEIR PARTNER ORPHANAGE [REDACTED] ON MARCH 10, 2011.... THE INVESTIGATION UNCOVERED EVIDENCE THAT SOME CHILDREN ATTENDING A BOARDING SCHOOL LOCATED ON THE SAME COMPOUND ... HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED AS ADOPTABLE BY ORPHANAGE EMPLOYEES. ORPHANAGE EMPLOYEES STATED THAT ONCE A CHILD HAD BEEN IDENTIFIED, AN ORPHANAGE SOCIAL WORKER VISITED THE CHILD'S HOUSE TO ENCOURAGE FAMILY MEMBERS TO RELINQUISH THE CHILD FOR ICA [INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION]. ORPHANAGE SOCIAL WORKERS STATED THAT THEY EXPLAINED TO THE FAMILIES THAT IF THE CHILD WERE PLACED INTO ICA, HE OR SHE WOULD GROW UP PROPERLY, GET A GOOD EDUCATION, AND RETURN TO ETHIOPIA AFTER HE OR SHE TURNED 18 YEARS OLD TO HELP THE FAMILY.... CURRENTLY THERE ARE 166 STUDENTS IN THE BOARDING SCHOOL AND NINE HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED FOR PLACEMENT IN ICA."

THE BLESSING THE CHILDREN ORPHANAGE ALSO RUNS A WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM THAT PROVIDES LOCAL WOMEN CASH GRANTS TO START A SMALL BUSINESS. SO FAR, BLESSING THE CHILDREN HAS ASSISTED 25 WOMEN THROUGH THIS PROGRAM IN KAMASHI TOWN. OF THE 25, AT LEAST 15 WOMEN HAD RELINQUISHED CHILDREN FOR INTER-COUNTRY ADOPTION TO THE BLESSING THE CHILDREN ORPHANAGE. AN ORPHANAGE SOCIAL WORKER DENIED THE PROGRAM PROVIDES AN INCENTIVE TO WOMEN TO RELINQUISH THEIR CHILDREN....

EMBASSY STAFF ATTENDED A MEETING ORGANIZED BY THE SIDAMA ZONE FINANCE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT BUREAU IN AWASSA FROM MARCH 25-27, 2011. LOCAL GOE OFFICIALS REPORTED THAT THEY RECENTLY INVESTIGATED ORPHANAGES IN THE AREA AND FOUND A NUMBER OF IRREGULARITIES ON WHICH THEY PLANNED TO TAKE ACTION. THESE CONCERNS INCLUDED AGREEMENTS BETWEEN ASPS AND ORPHANAGES FOR THE SOLE PURPOSE OF DELIVERING CHILDREN INTO ICA, LIMITED FAMILY-BASED DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS, AND FUNDING MECHANISMS BETWEEN ASPS AND ORPHANAGES THAT PAY THESE FACILITIES ON A PER CHILD BASIS. ZONAL OFFICIALS ALSO EXPRESSED THEIR UNEASE OVER THE INTEGRITY OF ORPHANAGES THAT EMPLOY LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND/OR QUICKLY FUNNEL CHILDREN TO TRANSITION HOMES IN ADDIS ABABA....

A JANUARY 2011 VISIT TO THE SHALOM ORPHANAGE, WHICH WORKS WITH BETHANY INTERNATIONAL AND AMERICA WORLD, CONCLUDED THAT THE ORPHANAGE EMPLOYED A LOCAL GOE [GOVERNMENT OF ETHIOPIA] OFFICIAL TO ASSIST BIRTH FAMILIES WILLING TO RELINQUISH CHILDREN TO THE ORPHANAGE. FIVE RELINQUISHING BIRTH PARENTS IN BORECHA WOREDA CONFIRMED TO EMBASSY PERSONNEL THAT THIS OFFICIAL DIRECTED THEM THROUGH THE RELINQUISHMENT PROCESS. IN TWO OF THESE CASES, THE RELINQUISHING FAMILIES STATED THAT THE OFFICIAL TOLD THEM THAT THE SHALOM ORPHANAGE WOULD PROVIDE A FINANCIAL REWARD TO THE BIRTH FAMILY AFTER THE COMPLETION OF THE ADOPTION ... THE EMBASSY INFORMED THE GOE THAT THE USG [U.S. GOVERNMENT] FINDS UNETHICAL THE PRACTICE OF A GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE COERCING AND OFFERING FINANCIAL INCENTIVES TO BIRTH FAMILIES TO RELINQUISH A CHILD. THE SHALOM ORPHANAGE IS NOT AMONG THOSE SCHEDULED TO CLOSE....

OUR FINDINGS OF COERCION, UNETHICAL RECRUITMENT, AND MISMANAGEMENT BY ORPHANAGES AND ASPS [ADOPTION SERVICE PROVIDERS], CLEARLY SHOW THAT DESPITE SIGNIFICANT OUTREACH ON OUR AND THE DEPARTMENT'S PART, ASPS ARE STILL NOT PULLING THEIR WEIGHT IN ADDING DUE DILIGENCE TO THEIR PROCESS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL. THE FUTURE OF ADOPTIONS IN ETHIOPIA IS GROWING MORE AND MORE TENUOUS.

—Unethical Recruitment, Orphanage Closures, and Reduced Processing Provide Bleak Outlook on Ethiopian Adoptions, April 25, 2011

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