



Briefing by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs Michele Bond on National Adoption Day

Office of the Spokesman

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MR. TONER: Good afternoon. It's my great pleasure to introduce Deputy Assistant Secretary Michele Bond, who has been our Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Directorate for Overseas Citizens Services since July 2007. Previously, she was the Director of the Office of Policy Coordination and Public Outreach in the Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs, and she's also served as the managing director of the Office of Overseas Citizens Services, so she brings a wealth of experience to her job.

And today, in light of National Adoption Day tomorrow, we thought it a good opportunity to have her come down and give us an update on some of the activities of our embassies vis-à-vis adoption services. So with that, I'll introduce Deputy Assistant Secretary Bond. Thank you.

MS. BOND: Thank you very much. Good afternoon. As the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Overseas Citizens Services in the Bureau of Consular Affairs, I am really happy to be here this afternoon to celebrate the fact that November is National Adoption Month. There are hundreds of Department of State employees who adoptive parents, foster parents, or adult adoptees. So this is an important and personal issue for State Department staff.

More officially, the Department is the U.S. central authority for The Hague Convention on Inter-Country Adoption, and is deeply committed to promoting and facilitating adoption as a permanent, loving alternative for children who cannot remain in their birth families.

As mentioned, tomorrow, November 21, is National Adoption Day. The day is being marked around the United States at courthouses where hundreds of children in foster care will have their adoptions finalized. Many U.S. embassies around the world are also celebrating National Adoption Month through their own outreach activities that emphasize the importance that the United States attaches to adoption and especially to inter-country adoption.

Here at the State Department, we continue to work with other countries to develop and implement standards and procedures to help ensure that as many children as possible can find permanent, loving homes. We believe that inter-country adoption can be an important option for children in need, and that every child deserves a loving home.

In April 2008, the United States joined more than 75 other nations as a party to The Hague Convention on Inter-Country Adoption. It's a fundamental tenant of the convention that when a child cannot be reintegrated into his or her birth family, the first option should be adoption by a family in that child's country of origin. When that domestic adoption in the child's country of origin is not possible, then inter-country adoption opens another opportunity for a child to find the loving home that he or she deserves.

The United States is committed to ensuring that all inter-country adoptions to the United States or from the United States protect each child's fundamental rights and prevent the abduction, sale, or trafficking of children. We also encourage all countries to take the necessary steps to join and implement The Hague Inter-Country Adoption Convention. Since the convention entered into force for the United States, nearly 900 children have been adopted both into and out of the United States in accordance with Hague Convention procedures. Several thousand additional children have been adopted under non-Hague procedures because their cases had begun before The Hague went into force for us.

Several Hague partners have contacted our office here at the Department to discuss the interest of their citizens in adopting waiting children in U.S. foster care, an option we strongly endorse for those who have not found permanent homes in the United States. In Fiscal Year 2009, almost 13,000 foreign-born children were adopted by U.S. Citizen families. More than 70,000 domestic adoptions were completed in the United States during the same period. Adoption is more common in the United States than in any other country, and we adopt more foreign-born children than the rest of the world combined. Those are facts that we can all be proud of.

No matter where or in what circumstances children are born, they deserve the opportunity to grow up in a loving family. The Department of State is proud to be part of National Adoption Month and to add our own recognition and thanks to all of the families that have opened their hearts and homes through adoption. Thank you.

Questions? Sir.

QUESTION: Charley Keyes from CNN. You and I have talked in the past. What are some of the remaining problem countries in regard to U.S. adoptions? I know that the United States has voiced concerns in the past about China. Can you just bring us up to date on that?

MS. BOND: All right, yes. To talk about China, which I would not call a problem country as far as adoptions are concerned, but I certainly can talk about that a little bit – in Fiscal Year 2009, just over 3,000 children were adopted from China to the United States. China --

QUESTION: Is that the largest number among --

MS. BOND: No, that's down a little bit from -- oh, you mean the largest among all -- I think it probably was the largest for that year, yeah.

QUESTION: So the largest among all countries?

MS. BOND: That's right. China is a party to The Hague Adoption Convention and has been for some time, and so all adoptions now starting between China and

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the United States have to be under Hague procedures. The U.S. Consulate in Guangzhou estimates that it takes about 38 months to complete an adoption absent special circumstances. It is possible to complete an adoption more rapidly if the child who is being adopted has been identified as a special needs child.

Normally, the children, when they are adopted, are not 38 months old or older. It takes that long for the adopting family to complete the arrangements, but that doesn't mean that the child they're adopting was already born at the time they began the procedure. A growing number of the children now available for inter-country adoption from China are being adopted through what's called the Waiting Child Program. They are kids who are older or they have special needs. And many American families are now pursuing this option.

QUESTION: Is the United States satisfied, though, that the incidents in China where some public officials were arrested for dealing in illegally obtained infants, that that's been resolved to the United States satisfaction?

MS. BOND: Well, what we see is that the Chinese who have taken it very seriously are investigating, are proceeding to file charges and prosecute. The situations where we get very concerned around the world are when we can see that there's clear evidence of a problem, and the country where it's occurring is not taking that problem seriously – not investigating, not prosecuting. That would be a matter of concern, and that's not the case in China.

QUESTION: Where might it be the case?

MS. BOND: Well, for example, in September of 2008, we allowed a bilateral agreement with Vietnam to expire because of our own concerns that there were very clear evidence of corruption and of bad paperwork, of falsification of children's identities and backgrounds in order to make them available for adoption. And we couldn't resolve the questions that were raised without the cooperation of Vietnamese officials, and we weren't getting that cooperation.

QUESTION: And where does that stand – sorry, just one more – where does that stand now with Vietnam?

MS. BOND: At present, Vietnam has drafted a new adoption law that is being considered by their parliament. We've had an opportunity to talk to them and still have another – other countries that adopt from Vietnam. There's a lot of interest in working with Vietnam to improve their procedures. And so what we see right now in Vietnam is the government moving in a very good direction, and doing so very seriously. It will, however, be quite some time before Vietnam has and has implemented a new and good adoption program.

I think you were first and then --

QUESTION: Thank you. Is there a different category as far as the adoption program concerned from India to the U.S., or are there any cases of – because I heard in the past that the – it is very difficult – somebody to bring – as far as adoption is concerned. Or is there some kind of criteria, how old one should be for adoption?

MS. BOND: The question has to do with adoptions from India. And we are working very closely with the Indian authorities to make sure that those adoptions that occur are taking place in full conformity with our law and Indian law. I think some of the problems that have come up have been when American citizens of Indian origin adopt in India, and without realizing that they shouldn't, they sometimes adopt as Indian citizens instead of as Americans as foreigners.

And they – that procedure is different from the procedures for foreign citizens adopting Indian children. And because of various steps that they take, none of them meant to be wrong, they can sometimes find themselves in a situation where it's very hard to process the paperwork for the child to come to the United States. So we've been working with Indian authorities to try to make sure that courts know that they can't process as a local domestic adoption a situation where the child is intending to come to the United States and live here.

QUESTION: But as far as somebody in the U.S., whether it's a U.S. Citizen or green card holder, it's the same rules or it's only U.S. Citizen can --

MS. BOND: You have to be a United States Citizen to adopt a foreign-born child and bring that child to the United States and --

QUESTION: And finally – and – I'm sorry --

MS. BOND: No, fine.

QUESTION: Finally, any age limit, how old one should be to – for adoption?

MS. BOND: Well, those rules are set by individual countries, and I don't know offhand, although I can – I would like to take this opportunity to refer you to our excellent website, adoption.state.gov, which gives a great deal of information, including country-specific information of the type that you were asking.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS. BOND: You had one in --

QUESTION: Yeah. Which countries do you see the sharpest increase in children ready for adoption? Is it related to conflict or poverty such as Zimbabwe?

MS. BOND: Well, the – one country that I could point to that had a sharp increase this year is Ethiopia, where the numbers that – it was up about 30 percent, and let me just – the – it was just over 2,200 children who were adopted this year from Ethiopia. That is not related to conflict. By and large, conflict is not one of the issues that tends to lead to a spike in adoptions, because children may be separated from their families but haven't necessarily permanently lost those families as a result of population movements.

So we are watching adoptions and examining the situation in Ethiopia very carefully, because it's a very serious concern when you – if you see the number of adoptions start to increase sharply, you want to be sure that the infrastructure if that country is equipped to monitor and carefully vet every one of those cases. Rapid growth isn't necessarily a good thing.

QUESTION: You are mentioning experiences from other continents. How is the experience here in the Western Hemisphere between Latin American countries and the U.S.?

MS. BOND: When the United States joined The Hague Convention in April 2008, that made us a Hague partner for quite a few countries which prefer to limit their adoption interchanges with fellow – to fellow Hague countries. So there are some countries where we – American are now eligible to adopt that they might not have been before. And developing those contacts and those relationships is not something, again, that happens overnight. But I think that we may see a shift in some countries of more interest in looking for homes for children in the United States if they haven't been able to have them adopted locally.

More generally, we have Guatemala, which is a country in which new adoptions cannot begin at this point. Guatemala is a Hague country and they are working to establish Hague-compliant procedures --

QUESTION: In Mexico?

MS. BOND: Mexico is a country where there are surprisingly few adoptions to the United States, and that is -- it's surprising in the sense that we have -- we share such a long border. But there is a pretty strong reluctance in Mexico to allow children to be adopted by foreign families, even Mexican American families. And so by and large, the majority of the adoptions that we see are intra-family adoptions, not adoptions by people who are unrelated to the child.

QUESTION: On Ethiopia, you're not entirely clear what's causing the spike of adoptions?

MS. BOND: Well, I think what's causing the spike of adoptions is that there are, first of all, many children in the country who are homeless and/or living in institutions and need homes. And there are people who are working to try to identify those children and match them with people in the United States and in other countries who are interested in adoption. Our concern about it is that you can easily find yourself in a situation where it's difficult to tell the difference between children who genuinely don't have a family and those who have been documented to look like they don't.

And unless you have the host government with -- well equipped to investigate itself, to document, to lock in the identity of these children, then it can be very hard to prevent the missed documentation of children, and situations where, for example, birth parents are coerced or persuaded to relinquish their children for money or not, but -- when it's something that they wouldn't have considered doing if someone hadn't been pressuring them to do it. Obviously, that's not something that we want.

QUESTION: So there are some suspicions maybe that there's a racket going on or --

MS. BOND: It's something that the Ethiopian Government is carefully looking at and so are we and so is every other government whose citizens are adopting there. Ukraine, as it happens, is another country where we saw a 30 percent increase in adoptions last year. In the case of Ukraine, however, that's not -- it's not something that we see as a trend. The numbers tend to go up and down a bit. So it can be hard to know whether you're definitely seeing a movement in one direction or the other.

QUESTION: Let me just follow on quickly, if you don't mind, please. What we want to know clearly, not just from one particular country (inaudible), let's say from around the globe. As far as criteria for -- like it's a conflict or poverty or what causes or brings those children for adoption basically to the U.S.? Is it the regional conflicts? You are saying (inaudible) or elsewhere, war or homeless or the parents are dying and that -- I mean, what are the major causes of the adoption of people (inaudible) of people, or children coming here?

MS. BOND: All right. The question is what are the typical reasons that children are placed for inter-country adoption. And when you talk about countries around the world, including the United States, which also has children that are adopted by foreign families and leave here to go and live in a foreign country --

QUESTION: Yeah. I'm sorry, let's say India or let's say sometimes they say -- they seek asylum. What's the difference between asylums or other adoption for children, let's say? Are there children also in that category or for --

MS. BOND: Okay. Let me get to that question in a moment, if I may. The reasons that children are available for adoption by foreign citizens vary in different countries. In China, typically the reason has been that there were children, little girls, who were born and placed for adoption by families who were hoping that they might have a son.

And the fact is that -- there was a reference in one question to age requirements and other requirements being imposed on adopting parents -- the number of children available for adoption in China has diminished. And the number of people who are interested in adopting in China is much higher than the number of children that are -- that need homes. And that's one reason that the Chinese Government imposed the changes and the requirements for adopting parents. They were simply trying to reduce the pool of all well-qualified people who were applying to adopt. They had many more than they could vet and many more than they needed.

In some other countries, the children are in care because of local poverty. But what's important is that in some countries, children may be placed in institutions by their families because the families know that's a place where the children will be fed and cared for and educated. And there are countries where the families then anticipate that the children will return home when they're a little bit older, maybe 10 or 12, old enough to contribute to the family and help their parents.

And so that's one of the things that we have to be on guard against. The fact that a child is in an orphanage and has been there for some time doesn't make him an orphan in the sense -- well, in any sense, he's not a child who needs a home. He has a family.

I think -- I hope that that's helpful in terms of the --

QUESTION: Yeah, only about asylum, if -- if you had any case of the child or somebody had asked asylum for a child rather than adoption.

MS. BOND: The question is about whether children also come into the United States as asylees, as people who are seeking asylum from our government as opposed to adoption. Getting asylum is a very different sort of process. And in order to apply for asylum, a person has to show that he is facing some sort of persecution or threat in his own country. Typically, unaccompanied children would not be likely to apply for asylum. That would be rare.

MR. TONER: We have time for just one more question.

QUESTION: Can I just ask very quickly for you to speak in a little more detail about your comment that some other countries are approaching the United States about adopting American children? Who are those countries and how many American kids are adopted overseas?

MS. BOND: Since we joined The Hague, so since April of 2008, there are 71 American children who have been adopted by foreign families. Thirty-seven of those were adopted under The Hague, so that means that they were adopted to Hague partner countries and the adoption began after April 1, 2008 -- the work on it, because as you know, it takes months to complete these things. So we're still at a stage where the majority of outgoing adoptions are non-Hague, but we anticipate that they're going to be primarily Hague.

The typical countries -- Canada, Western Europe, Australia, countries that are our Hague partners and where local adoption opportunities are very limited, they're very -- relatively few children available for adoption. To their credit, several of the governments that have approached us have said that they are particularly interested in identifying waiting children in foster care as candidates for adoption by their citizens. They are not trying to compete for healthy

newborn infants.

MR. TONER: Thank you very much, I appreciate it.

QUESTION: Thank you.

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